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The Girl in His House

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The Girl in His House

CHAPTER I

ARMITAGE had come thirteen thousand miles--across deserts, through jungles, over snow-clad peaks--as fast as camels and trains and ships could carry him, driven by an all-compelling desire Sixty-odd days ago he had been in the amber-mines in the Hukainng Valley, where Upper Burma ends and western China begins; and here he was, riding up old Broadway--a Broadway that twinkled and glittered and glared with the same old colored clock lights. Men were queer animals. He had sworn never to set foot inside of New York again.

A paragraph in a New York newspaper, a sheet more than a year old and fallen to the base usage of wrapping-paper and protecting temporarily a roll of pudgy Burmese cheroots from the eternal mold of the middle Orient, had started him upon this tremendous, swinging journey. A thousand times he had perused that paragraph. Frayed and tattered to the point of disintegration, the clipping now reposed in his wallet. He no longer disturbed it; it wasn't necessary; he knew it by heart and could recite it word for word:

JOHN SANDERSON, the multi-millionaire packer, died yesterday at his summer home on Lake Michigan. He was sixty-nine years old.

The woman who had jilted Armitage was a widow.

Curious thing! He had come down from the top of the world, as it were, shamelessly, a flame in his heart that resembled a torch in the wind. So long as he pressed down through the jungles and deserts the flame burned with unabated ardor; but at Mandalay--the outer rim of civilization--it began to waver a little. At Rangoon it was like a candle in a breathless room. But on the way over to Calcutta it burst forth anew, and never wavered again until he came out on the tea veranda of the Bertolini and stared across Naples at Vesuvius in the moonlight. Even then he had not realized what was happening--that his torch, having nothing celestial in its substance, was burning out.

Two hours ago, as the great ship slipped into her berth, the last spark had flickered and vanished, leaving him with his heart full of bitter ashes. To have come thirteen thousand miles, like a whirlwind, only to learn that for six years he had been the victim of a delusion! He laughed aloud in savage irony. The old habits of civilization were clamoring for recognition; and first among these was the sense of shame, not because he had come all this distance, but because his love had been a poor thing and had not been strong enough to survive the ordeal. What an incomprehensible thing was the human heart!

Six long years in the far wildernesses, hugging a cold shadow for a substance, imagining himself to be a martyr when in truth he was only a simple fool! Shamelessly he had come to throw himself at her feet again; and behold! he was without desire.

The taxicab stopped. As Armitage stared over the shutter his mouth opened and his brows became Gothic arches of amazed inquiry. The obsequies over a dead passion came to an abrupt, unfinished ending; the whole dismal affair went out of his thoughts as a wisp of smoke leaves a chimney-pot and disappears.

What in the name of the seven wonders could this mean? Lights--flights in the windows and lights in the hall. The silhouette of a woman appeared at one of the drawing-room windows. She was evidently looking out. Almost immediately she drew back. Armitage felt that frozen immobility peculiar to nightmares. Was he truly awake?

The front door of the brownstone opened and a bareheaded man ran down the steps to the vehicle. The smooth brass buttons on his coat marked him down as a butler. "Mr. Athelstone?" he asked, with subdued excitement.

"No. My mistake. I say, driver, we'll go to the hotel, after all."

"All right, sir."

"Sorry to trouble you. Wrong number," said Armitage to the astonished butler.

The taxicab grumbled and sputtered and started off jerkily; but until it wheeled around into Fifth Avenue the butler remained at the curb, while the world-wide traveler never took his bewildered gaze off the house with the lighted windows. Something inconceivable had happened, something so incredible and unexpected that Armitage was at that moment powerless to readjust himself to the event.

"Am I in the middle of a nightmare, or what?" he murmured, fumbling in his pockets for his pipe. "Lights, a butler, and a woman at the window!" All at once he felt inspired.

"I say, driver, what street was that?"

"The street and number you gave me, Sir."

"Seventy-second?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see the lights in the windows? Did you see the woman behind the curtains? Did a butler come down the steps?"

"Yes, sir. I heard him ask you if you were Mr. Athelstone."

"Then, by George, I'm awake!"

The driver escaped the heavy forewheels of an omnibus only by the narrowest margin. By the time he was in a mental condition to tell the omnibus-driver all about his family history it was too late; the rear wheels of the lumbering colossus of the asphalt were passing.

"Bug, pure bug!" he grumbled. This observation was not directed at the vanishing omnibus-driver; it was the final round of a series of cogitations relative to this "fare" of his. "Nothing to it; I ought to go straight to Bellevue. Lights? Of course there were lights!" He reached for the clutch and swore softly as the steamer trunk nicked his elbow.

Of all the queer dubs he had ever driven off Pier 53, this chap inside took the palm, ribbon and all. Off to the Racket Club as fast as the law allowed, only to hear his ludship say that he had forgotten he was no longer a member. Then, bang! for the hotel in Forty-second Street, where there was more doddering; and, whoof! a mile a minute up to the brownstone in Seventy-second. Lost in little old New York. And now the dub was smoking a pipe strong enough to knock over a fire-horse. Luggage? Well, say! Three suit-cases that had come out of the Ark, and a battered English kitbag that had been Cain's on the big hike, and a gun-case that weighed a ton and must have scared the customs inspectors stiff.

When he stopped at the hotel entrance he looked thoughtfully at the meter. The old girl was working to the minute and was registering four dollars and eighty cents. He braced himself and shot out his jaw truculently. Now for that old mossback about crooked meters.

The curb porter threw open the door. The "fare" extricated himself from the luggage and stepped forth. "Here, driver; and keep the change."

The chauffeur, wise as Solomon and shrewd as Jacob, hastily inspected the bill under the meter lamp. It was a

tenner. Five-twenty for a tip? Well, well; that wasn't so bad for a lunatic. "Thank you, sir," he mumbled, with rather a shamefaced amiability.

Armitage went into the lobby and wended his way through the super-dressed dinner crowd to the desk. Two bell-boys staggered after him, panting. They set down the luggage and eyed it curiously. They were tolerably familiar with foreign labels, but here was a collection totally unknown to them. The clerk swung out the register and casually glanced at the straight body, the lean, tanned, handsome face of the guest, who, after a moment of trifling indecision, wrote "James Armitage, Como, Italy."

Once in his room, Armitage called for the floor waiter: "A club steak, fried sweets, lettuce, chilli sauce, and a pot of coffee. Have it here quarter after eight. That will give me leeway for a bath."

"Yes, sir."

As the door closed Armitage scowled at his luggage, up from which drifted vaguely the unpleasant odor of formaldehyde. Lights--a woman behind the curtains--a butler who wanted to know if he was Mr. Athelstone!

"Hang me!" He climbed over the grips to the telephone and called up a number. "Give me Mr. Bordman, please.... Not at home?... What?... Went away last April?... Thank you."

Armitage turned away from the telephone and twisted his mustache violently. Fear laid hold of him, that indescribable fear which, twist and turn as one may, keeps its face hidden. Below this fear stirred a primordial instinct: the instinct which causes a dog in the hour of carnal satiety to take the bare bone and bury it against a future need. Thunderstruck, Armitage recollected for the first time that he had not buried his bone.

"Pshaw! But that's utterly impossible."

He had bathed and dressed by the time the waiter returned--dressed in the same suit he had worn on board the ship. As the tantalizing aroma from the steak tickled his nostrils he forgot everything except the longing to satisfy a singular craving which had, metaphorically, ridden behind his saddle for six years. A thousand nights he had sat before acrid dung fires and dreamed of club steaks.

Finishing this delectable meal, a weirdly humorous idea popped into his head. He cleaned his pipe, put on a pair of rubber-soled shoes, loaded his automatic, and set forth upon an adventure which was destined to renew his interest in civilization.

It was October. An east wind was blowing heartily and the old familiar tang of the sea was in the air. There was something in it that stirred in Armitage's mind fragmentary pictures from the seven seas, the sandy forelands, the bending cocoanut palms, the gay parakeets in the clove-trees. The East was calling; and shortly he knew he would be answering it again. For the present, however, his destination was the brownstone house in Seventy-second Street, once ordinary enough, but now endued with a genuine mystery. The house was one of six in a compact row, a survival of the bald, ugly architecture of the seventies.

Upon finding himself in front of this house, Armitage knocked his pipe against the heel of his shoe. "I'm a reasonable man," he mused aloud--a habit he had acquired in the somber solitudes where the homely sound of one's voice is often a buckler against the unknown terrors of the night. "But who the dickens is this man Athelstone?"

He understood one fact clearly: six years ago he would not have contemplated, much less put to action, the project he now had in mind. He would have gone resolutely, if conveniently, up the steps, rung the bell, and satisfied his doubts peremptorily. In those far-off days impulses had always been carefully looked into and constantly rejected as either unlawful or unethical. He still recognized the unlawful, but the ethical no longer

disturbed his mental processes. What he purposed to do was not exactly unlawful, considering his foreknowledge, but it was decidedly unethical. The thing had a thrill in it, a spice of danger, a bit of leopard-stalking in the dark. Without appreciating the fact--or, if he did, ignoring it--Armitage had sloughed off much of the veneer of civilization and now reveled in primordial sensations.

He was going into that house, through the back way, like an ordinary porch-climber, because the method appealed to him and because, legally and morally (as he supposed), he had the right to enter in any manner he pleased.

He went on, turned down Seventy-third

Street until he came to a house that had a small lawn at one side, protected by a high iron grille. Glancing right and left to assure himself that his actions were unobserved, he climbed over this grille, easily and silently, like the practised athlete he was. Crouching, he ran down the garden to the rear fence, which was of board. A single vault carried him over this. Over three more wooden fences he went, avoiding ash-cans and clothes-lines, until he came to a pause in the rear of the brownstone in Seventy-second Street. He wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

"Lordy! but this is like old times!"

A dog suddenly broke forth in shrill, furious barks.

"Somebody's poodle!" He shrank against the fence and waited for the racket to subside. The old rule still held--barking dogs didn't bite.

As he rested, a new thought wedged itself in. Clare Wendell! He had come thirteen thousand miles because he had learned that she was a widow, and for nearly three hours he hadn't given her a single thought. The ironic chuckle died in his throat, however.

It became smothered by a sober, revealing thought. He ought to be very grateful to her. His loyalty had kept the moral fiber of him intact; he was still a white man.

Up the side of the back porch of this house in Seventy-second Street was a heavy trellis. Lightly and soundlessly he mounted this. He had learned to walk with that elastic-giving step, more feline than human. Once on the roof of the porch, he stretched himself out flat and waited for several minutes. He rose. With his penknife he turned the window lock--as he had done a hundred times before--raised the window with extreme care, and slipped inside. Here again he waited. He strained his ears. Six years in the wildernesses had trained them so fine that here in ultra-civilization ordinary sounds were sometimes painful.

Music! He stopped and took the automatic from his pocket. He tiptoed down the hall, careful to observe that there were no lights under any door fine. Some one was playing the piano down-stairs. Step by step he proceeded down to the main hall. Luck was with him; the hall light had been turned off. He crossed the hall and entered the library, or study, which was dark. Between this room and the drawing-room hung heavy curtains. These had been drawn together, and where they joined and along the bottom were ribbons of light.

Music, real music! Years and years ago he had heard that piece, Grieg's "Danse Arabesque," and the other woman hadn't played half so well. He could distinguish the monotonous beating of the camel drums. Curious beyond all reason, he slipped a finger along the edge of one of the curtains and peered through the space thus formed. At that moment the music stopped. The performer turned her face toward the piano lamp--a wonderful Ming jar--and the interloper caught his breath.

He was gazing upon the loveliest young face he had ever seen--pearl and pomegranate and Persian peach!

There was an amber nimbus of light hovering over her soft brown hair. Who was she, and what in the world was she doing here? The latent sense of the ethical stirred and awoke for the first time in many months. He felt the itch of the hair shirt of society, and the second sense was one of overpowering shame. He had neither legal nor moral right behind these curtains.

Had the girl come toward him just then she would have discovered him. He was entranced, incapable of mobility. But she did not come his way. She walked over to a window, out of which she gazed for a while.

She turned, stretched out two incomparable arms--and yawned most humanly. "Oh... dear!"

The curtains were antique Japanese silk tapestries, quite as beautiful and rare as any of the Polish rugs, and the dust of centuries still impregnated the warp and woof.

Having had his nose against the fabric for several minutes, Armitage suddenly trembled with terror. He became conscious of the inclination to sneeze. He struggled valiantly, but to no avail. "At-choo!" he thundered.

"Who's there?" cried the girl in crisp, clear, affrighted tones.

CHAPTER II

WHAT a predicament! Realizing that he could not stop to explain, that he had not entered the right way for explanation, and that, if the servants became alarmed, he would be in for it seriously and more or less complicatedly, he turned and fled. Noise did not matter now; he must gain that open window before any of the servants could outflank him. All in this house, the house he had been born in--flights, servants, and the loveliest girl he had ever laid eyes on!

Up the stairs in three bounds and down the hall, incredibly swift, thence through the window and onto the roof of the porch. He jumped hardily; there was no time for the trellis. The girl was hot upon his heels; he could hear her. Artemis, Diana; for, as he struck the turf, he saw from the corner of his eye--one of those undeveloped pictures one is never quite certain of--the white of her dress at the window. In Bagdad now, or Delhi, or even Teheran, such an affair would have fitted into the scheme of things quite naturally; but here in New York!

He ran straight for the fence, scrambled over rather than vaulted it. Then that infernal poodle began yammering again. He was later to be made aware of the fact that this same benighted and maligned poodle saved him from a night's lodging in the nearby police station. Armitage did not pause in his inglorious flight until he was on the right of the grille in Seventy-third Street.

He leaned against the bars, panting, but completely and thoroughly reveeneered. "Of all the colossal tomfools!" he said, aloud. "What in thunder am I going to do now?"

"Well, Aloysius," boomed a heavy voice, which was followed by a still heavier hand, "you might come along with me; the walking's good. Bell out o' order? Was there any beer in the ice-chest?" The policeman peered under the peak of Armitage's cap. "I saw you climb over that grille. Up with your hands, and no monkey-shines, or I'll rap you one on the conk!"

Armitage obeyed mechanically. There was a temporary cut-off between his mind and his body; they had ceased to co-ordinate. The policeman patted all the pockets, and a thrill of relief ran over the victim. Somewhere along the route he had lost the automatic. As he felt the experienced fingers going over his body he summoned with Herculean effort his scattered forces. Smack into the arms of a policeman! Here was a situation which called for a vast political pull or a Machiavellian cunning.

"Well, what's the dope?" demanded the policeman, rather puzzled to find neither weapons nor burglarious tools.

"I take it you're a reasonable man," said Armitage, breathlessly.

"Can the old-folks stuff. What were you doing in that yard?"

"Supposing I tell you I've done nothing wrong, that my name is James Armitage, and that--" Armitage paused, shocked. He couldn't tell this policeman anything. The thought of the girl made it utterly impossible. He would simply be taken around and confronted. Bog, bog! He could feel himself sinking deeper and deeper every moment.

"Well, go on," urged the policeman, ironically. "This is Friday and everything smells fish."

"This is your beat?" asked Armitage, desperately.

"It is; and I'm always on it, and no back talk."

As the little bits of colored glass in a kaleidoscope tumble into recognizable forms so Armitage's broken thoughts tumbled into coherency. He had just one chance. "Do you know Robert Burlingham?"

"Around in Seventy-second Street? Yeah. I begin to see. Poker game, and the missus comes back from the country. Oh, I'm a good listener, believe me. Go on."

"The fact is," Armitage floundered, "I just got back from the other side of the world to-day, and I thought I'd give Burlingham a scare by going in the rear way."

"I was born in Ireland, but I vote in Missouri. But I'm a good listener; always ready to hear new stuff. Go on."

"Well, a poodle began yapping and I got cold feet."

"Of all the poor, old, blind alibis! But I'm going to give you a chance. We'll go around to Burlingham's. I'm giving you this chance, because I heard that poodle myself."

"The sooner the better!" Armitage let go a great sigh. "If he doesn't identify me, if he doesn't attest to my honesty--why, I'll agree to go anywhere you say, peacefully."

"You mean that?"

"On my honor. I tried a boy's trick and fell down on it."

The policeman hesitated. Finally he poked Armitage in the side with his night stick. "I'll go you, Aloysius. I'll see this through. It's a new one, and I want to know all about it for future reference. March!"

So Armitage--Changing between laughter and swear words--marched on ahead, feeling from time to time, if he slackened his pace, the tip of the night stick in his ribs. He wasn't in New York at all; he was in the ancient city of Bagdad. If the Burlinghams were out for the evening he was lost.

When they came to the Burlingham house, which was next door to the house he had just left so ignominiously, Armitage stopped. "He lives here."

"Right. Now waltz up and ring the bell. I'll be right in your shadow, Aloysius."

Armitage pushed the button. Two minutes later the door opened. "Hello, Edmonds!" Armitage hailed, gratefully. Here was someone who could identify him, Bob's old butler.

The old fellow squinted, stepped forward, then backward, and raised his hands. "Why, it's Mr. Armitage come back!"

"Is Bob home?"

"Yes, sir. Come right in.... But what's this?... A policeman?"

"A little question of identification, Edmonds, that's all. Step inside, officer."

The policeman did so, removing his cap. He stood on one leg, then on the other, no longer doubtful, but confused and embarrassed.

The butler hurried off.

"Say," said the policeman, cautiously. "looks as if I'd pulled a near bone. You get my side of it, don't you?"

"Certainly. You would have been perfectly justified in carrying me off to jail."

But what would this policeman think when he returned to the station and heard that there had been a burglar in the house next door?

"Well, you took some risks, believe me, playing that kind of a game. I wouldn't try it again."

"I can promise that."

A man about Armitage's age and a pretty woman came rushing out into the hall.

"Jim, you scalawag, is it really you?"

"Jimmie Armitage?"

"Alive and kicking. Bob, suppose you tell this officer that I'm all right. He caught me climbing over Durston's grille."

"Durston's grille?" Burlingham roared with laughter. Durston's grille, full of historical significance relative to their youth! How many times had they stolen over it in order to have a perfectly good alibi the next morning for a perfectly incredible father! "I'll back Armitage, Hanrahan. He went away before you came on this beat."

"All right. I'll be getting back to it."

"Got any cigars, Bob?"

They filled the policeman's pockets and turned him forth into the night.

As the door closed Armitage leaned against the wall and smiled weakly. "That was a narrow squeak," he said. "I'll tell you something about it later... Betty! ... Bob!... Lordy, how wonderful it is to see you again!"

The two caught his hands in theirs and dragged him into the cozy library, where they plumped him down into the lounge before the wood fire and flanked him. The three of them had been brought up in this neighborhood,

"Jimmie, my word, I never expected to see you again! We'd get a letter from you once in a while, but we couldn't answer; you didn't want any news from home. We sent holiday cards to your villa on the Como, but I don't suppose they found you. Thought you were gone for good."

"I didn't," said Mrs. Burlingham, who, like all happily wedded women, believed in clairvoyance. "What brought you back?" --confident that she knew.

"How's the baby?" countered Armitage.

"Baby? Why, the baby is twelve, and doing his bit at a military school. Some boy, Jim. If you turn out to be half as fine a man as he is--" Burlingham slapped his boyhood friend on the shoulder. "But what brought you back?"

"Fate," said Armitage, soberly. "But I thought it was this." He took out the clipping and handed it to Betty.

Now that he was safely at anchor in a most congenial harbor, he became aware of a strange, indescribable

exhilaration. A superficial analysis convinced him that it was not due to the propinquity of these old friends of his; rather the cause lay over there in the dark, beyond the shadows. Over and above this, he was in a quandary. How much should he tell of this tomfool exploit of his? Just enough to whet their curiosity, or just nothing at all? Sooner or later, though. Bob, who was a persistent chap, would be asking about Durston's grille.

Would she notify the police? He wasn't sure. She seemed rather a resolute young woman. Heavens! she had been after him like a hawk after a hare! Pearl and pomegranate and Persian peach! Was he fickle? Was that it? No. A fickle man could not have remained loyal for six years to the memory of a jilt. He determined to ask some questions later--cautious, roundabout questions. He was far off his course, with a paper compass and nothing to take the sun with. And still that tingle of exhilaration!

"And so that brought you back?" said Betty, returning the clipping.

"No; I only thought it brought me back. I honestly believe that I never really loved Clare at all. Else, why should I be glad to be back, assured that I can meet her without wobbling at the knees?" Armitage rolled the clipping into a ball and tossed it into the fire.

"She was here to tea this afternoon, Jim," said Betty, softly.

"She's back in town, then, with her millions?"

"Yes. She's different, though. I really think she cared for you. From a lovely girl she has become a beautiful woman,"

"Nothing doing, Betty. I shall never marry!" Armitage pulled out his pipe and filled it.

"Oh, piffle!" exploded Burlingham. "You're only thirty-four. Mark me, old scout, after six years' roaming around jungles and hobnobbing with 'duskies,' you'll fall for the first 'skirt' that makes googoo eyes at you. On the other hand, much as I like Clare, I'm glad you didn't hook up. She's beautiful, but hard. And don't you fool yourself that you weren't in love with her. You were; but you got over it."

"Piffle! A bit of slang sounds good."

"If human beings couldn't fall out of love as quickly and easily as they fall in, the murder editions of the evening papers would be on the streets before breakfast"; and Burlingham got out his pipe also.

For a quarter of an hour the two men sat in silence, puffing and blowing rings and sleepily eying the fire. Betty watched them amusedly. Weren't they funny! They hadn't seen each other in six long years, and hadn't ever expected to see each other again; and here they were, smoking their dreadful pipes and saying never a word! Two women, now--

"Say, Jim, that pipe of yours is a bird."

"Calabash I made myself."

"Well, when you bury it invite me to the funeral."

"Is it strong?"

"Strong? Wow! It would kill a bull elephant quicker than an express bullet. But finish her up and give us the dope about Durston's grille."

Armitage leaned forward and knocked the "dottle" from his pipe. "When I found that clipping I became full of flame. On the way down from Maingkwan to Mahdalay there was a torch in my heart. But, somehow, when I reached Naples I could feel the fire dying down. I hated myself, but I could not escape the feeling. When I stepped off the ship to-day I knew that I had done a sensible thing in surrendering to a mad, shameless impulse. I came very near throwing away my life for something that had ceased to exist or had never existed. Folks, I'm absolutely cured."

"Going to quit wandering?"

"Perhaps. Great world over there; fascinating."

"But where will you put up here? You've sold the old house. Jim, you could have knocked me over with a feather when I heard the news last April. To sell the house wasn't so much, considering you never intended to return; but to sell it furnished, with all those treasures your mother and father had so much fun in collecting! I couldn't quite understand that." Burlingham shook his head.

"Nor I," added his wife.

Armitage, despite the fact that the room was warm, sensed something like a cold finger running up and down his spine. "I suppose it did seem callous to you two. But, honestly, I never expected to come back again. How much does rumor say I got for it?" He dared not look at them.

"Eighty thousand."

"That's a tidy sum. I say, what sort of people are they?"

"We've met only the daughter," said Betty, "And, Jimmie Armitage, she's the loveliest creature I ever saw. Odd, unusual; in all my life I've never met any woman quite like her. She has the queerest ideas. The whole world is nothing except a fairy-story to her. I loved her the moment I saw her. Have you ever run across or heard of Hubert Athelstone, explorer and archeologist?"

"Athelstone? No. But that doesn't signify anything. Those chaps are a queer breed. They are known only among themselves. I've run into a few of them. They eat hieroglyphics, walk in a maze of them, sleep on them, and die under them. Almost always they are unattached, homeless beggars, or, if they have families, they forget all about them. No; I don't recollect the name. Odd one, though."

"We haven't met him yet. I believe he's somewhere in Yucatan. She hasn't seen him in ages. I never heard of a daughter worshipping a father the way this girl does. It makes me feel little and small when she begins to talk about him. My general impression regarding archeologists hasn't been complimentary. I've always pictured them as withered, dried-up things with huge glasses. But Mr. Athelstone is one of the handsomest men I've ever seen! She has shown me his photograph. It must have been taken before she was born, when he was somewhere in the late twenties. Anyhow, no novelist ever conjured a hero to match up with her father, from her point of view."

"Betty and I are crazy over her," said Burlingham.

"Indeed we are. About twice a year she hears from her father, and the letters are beautiful. The man must be a poet. We are eager to meet him. She was educated in a convent out of Florence in Italy, and she is more Italian in temperament than English. At eighteen she was ordered by her father to leave. An accomplished woman companion was given her, and together they spent about four years wandering over the ends of the earth. She came back to America in April, after her father had made the purchase of your house. Think of it! She's seen the Himalayas from Darjeeling! Motherless from childhood. Isn't it romantic? We see each other

nearly every day. I can't keep away from her. Suppose I have her over to tea to-morrow? She's been asking lots of questions about you."

"I'll be delighted to see her."

"And remember what I said about goo-goo eyes." Burlingham laughed.

Armitage got up. He knew enough for his present needs; the picture puzzle was fairly complete, and such blocks as were missing were easily to be supplied by imagination. He leaned against the mantel and idly kicked an andiron--a Florentine winemuller. "Yucatan. And nobody knows when he'll be back?"

"She hints of the possibility of his return during the holidays."

Have they changed the interior any?" Only enough to show that a woman instead of a bachelor lives there now. She's very much in love with everything. She had very little to bring into it. Do you know, Jim, you've changed?" concluded Betty, appraisingly.

"Older?" quizzically.

"No. There are lines in your face I never saw before. You are positively handsome."

"Piffle! Fat's been burnt out, that's all."

"No, that isn't it. You look--well, I can't just explain it."

"I can," said her husband, owlishly. "Jim's been living on hard ground instead of sofa pillows. And now, old scout, suppose we take up the original subject, Durston's grille."

"First, I'm going to bind you two to absolute secrecy. I'm not joking, folks; something mighty serious has happened to me, and I'm in dead earnest. Promise?"

"We promise," said Burlingham, mystified.

"The pipes of Fortune!" Armitage rumped his hair. "Did you ever hear them? When she blows, we dance. And goodness knows, I've just begun the queerest dance a man ever shook a leg to. I've been actually dumped into the middle of one of those Arabian Nights things. I did not sell the old home, furnished or unfurnished, to anybody in this world!"

CHAPTER III

ONCE, when Armitage was a little boy, he had gone into the country with his father for trout. They had been overtaken by a violent thunderstorm, and a green vivid bolt had riven the sod within a few feet of them. For hours afterward that green streak had intervened whichever way he looked--interfered with his sense of time and place, thrown him into a land of livid unreality, and partially convinced his child's mind that he had been transformed into a mechanical toy whose mechanism he could hear clicking inside.

On the morning following his amazing discovery that the house he was born in had been sold without his knowledge--a morning crisp and full of dazzling sunshine --the memory of that bolt came back to him, bringing with it suggestive comparisons. Minus the green streak, his sensations were almost identical. He could walk, think, act, but all with a consciousness that what he did was not real. Indeed, the actual thunderbolt was preferable to this figurative one. To go to bed fairly rich, and to wake up facing the possibilities of utter financial ruin!--helpless to avert it, totally incompetent to build anew! But Armitage was a brave young man, a philosopher who had long since recognized the uselessness of whining. He had at least learned in his wanderings that opportunities were not resuscitable. Dazedly, but pluckily, he started forth to find out how this ruin had been accomplished, vaguely hoping that his good luck would pull him through, that the ruin was not utter.

At nine o'clock he entered the Concord apartments, an old-fashioned building situated in an old-fashioned part of the town, and asked to see the janitor, aware that janitors were easily approachable and generally inclined toward verbosity, which was an interesting sidelight on his knowledge of human beings.

"I wish to make some inquiries regarding Mr. Bordman--Samuel Bordman--who lived here for many years."

"Ain't living here now," replied the janitor, briefly. "When he went away in April he didn't come back. His lease lapsed in August; so I had to rent his apartment."

"Have you any idea of his whereabouts?"

"Nope. Packed up and cleared out, 's all I know. Say"--with sudden interest--"be you a detective?"

"No. I'm merely one of his clients. I wanted to find him if possible. Did he seem all right when he left?"

"Well, he kind o' spruced up a bit toward the last and wore a pink in his buttonhole. But he wasn't any more lunny than usual."

"A trifle queer, eh?"

"On some points. Always paid his bills; so we hadn't any kick coming. Oh, he was all right. We all liked the old codger, if you come to that."

"Did a woman ever call on him?"

"Bo, whenever he saw a strange female he beat it for the dumb-waiter, believe me. They couldn't get near him with a ten-foot pole. Nope; nothing like that in his. He was here for about eighteen years; so I know. But you never can tell. He may have gone off the track. No fool like an old fool. A good sixty, if a day. Well, if he ran away to get married his things are here waiting for him, an old trunk and his furniture."

"I may have to come around for a peek into that trunk."

"If you come with the right papers."

"Thanks for your trouble."

"That's all right," replied the janitor as he followed Armitage to the door. "Those old boys--they run along forty years like clockwork, and then, pop! goes the weasel. But I never saw any dame asking for him."

Armitage went down the steps to the sidewalk. He was perfectly calm. Perhaps this was due to the fact that the suspense was over. Bordman, for thirty years a trusted agent, had absconded. The next step was to ascertain the extent of the damage. Out of a fortune of more than half a million dollars he might possess at this particular moment what he had in two letters of credit and the deposit in the Credito Italiano in Milan--thirty-seven thousand in all.

If Bordman had found it easy to sell the house in Seventy-second Street, how much easier to dispose of stocks and bonds and mortgages and cash! But how had he worked it without creating suspicion? How had he hoodwinked the keen bankers? How had he managed the transfer of the property without arousing some inquiry? These puzzles Armitage determined to solve at once. There was, however, a dim recollection regarding some power of attorney.

Six blocks below the Concord apartments was the Armitage office - building, where, behind a door with the modest sign, " Estates," Bordman had labored honorably for three decades. Toward this building Armitage measured his steps energetically, despite the fact that each step became heavier and harder, until his sensations were something akin to those of a man fighting a gale across sand dunes. Supposing the Armitage was gone?

Dread and self-analysis--dread for the possibilities of the future and tingling scorn for the past! Ruined; and he had no one to thank except himself. He took James

Armitage, former clubman, hunter, and idler, and analytically tore him into so many fragments that he was presently in the same category as Humpty Dumpty after the fall. Bob Burlingham had hit the nail on the head; For years he had lolled on metaphorical sofa pillows, a well-meaning, inefficient, pleasure-loving idler. Set to it, he could not have made out a list of his properties from memory. Never having been a spendthrift in the Broadway sense, there had always been fat balances to draw against. Bordman had taken care of everything. Once in a great while Bordman had called him down to the office to sign some paper; but he had never gone there for any other reason. The pale, obsequious little man had always bored him.

Armitage nibbled his mustache as he went along. The whole emptiness of his life stretched out vividly in a kind of processional review. Social routine: a ride in the Park in the morning, tea somewhere in the afternoon, a dinner dance or the theater, and a rubber or two at the club, broken by fishing and hunting trips and weekends in the country. A grasshopper's life! An idle, inconsequent grasshopper's life! And here was the first shrewd blast of winter tingling his isinglass wings!

Excuses--one after another he cast them aside. What he had done, to avoid the simple business cares of his estate, was inexcusable. Once upon a time he would have felt only bitterly wronged and abused by fate; but for six years he had been living very close to natural things, and--with the exception of what he had honestly believed to be love--he had learned that it was folly to lie to oneself. He laughed aloud. If his life that day had depended upon earning a dollar, he would have gone to his death at sundown. James Armitage, aged thirty-four; occupation, grasshopper.

A cynical, insidious idea crept into his head and tried to find lodgment there. Clare Wendell, rich and free....

"No! By the Lord Harry! I'll never stoop that low. I'll work. I wouldn't make a bad riding-master." He laughed again. "I suppose this is the kind of situation that offers a normally good man a fine chance to become a rogue. No, thanks!"

But what of the other girl, the girl who was living in his house, believing it to be lawfully hers? She or her father had paid eighty thousand for it in good faith, and she was living there all alone, for her father was evidently something of a will-o'-the-wisp. He couldn't go to her and tell her she'd been rooked by a dishonest lawyer. Pearl and pomegranate and Persian peach! It was very pleasant to recall the amber nimbus over her hair, the round, lovely arms. What would have happened had she caught him behind those curtains? What an infernal muddle! And here was the very gate to it, the Armitage office building.

He went in, prepared for the worst. After a search he found Morrissy, the janitor of the building, who had occupied his post for twenty-odd years.

"I'm Armitage," he announced without preamble. "Have you got the key to Bordman's office?"

"Yes, sir."

"Are all his things there?"

"Just as he left them. Been wondering if he was ever coming back. I recognize you, Mr. Armitage, and I'm glad to see you. I've been handling the rents without any legal authority. Had to take 'em over to the bank an' explain. The president said he guessed it would be all right, but that I ought to cable you the facts. But nobody knew your address."

A great weight slipped off Armitage's shoulders. "Then I'm still owner here?"

"Well, I guess so." Morrissy grinned. The young boss was having his joke.

"I say, didn't Bordman have a stenographer?"

"Ye-ah. Want her?"

"I jolly well do!"

"She's on the same floor. Here's the key. You go to the office and I'll get Miss Corrigan. She can get off for the morning. Heard anything from Bordman?"

"No."

"Queer."

Bordman's office looked as though he had left it only yesterday. It was scrupulously clean and orderly, due doubtless to the cleaning-woman's tri-weekly rounds. There was an old-fashioned safe in one corner, a large globe of the world, rows of letter-files and shelves of brown law-books. There was nothing whatever to indicate that Bordman had left the office in a hurry or upon impulse.

Armitage sat down in the chair at the desk and began to whistle softly. The outlook wasn't so dark as might be. If the office-building was still free and unattached, why, he would have between ten and twelve thousand a year. Presently the janitor and Miss Corrigan came in.

"I'm Miss Corrigan," she said. "You wished to see me?" She recognized him instantly. Three times before she had seen him in this office. A little sigh pressed against her lips as she recalled how yonder clean-cut, handsome face had stirred the romantic in her. Nearly all her book heroes had taken upon themselves the face of this man now smiling at her amiably. A vague thrill of gladness ran over her. She had made a hero out of him eight years ago, and his countenance was still open and manly. Here was a man who had traveled straight;

money hadn't slackened the fiber. "You are Mr. Armitage."

"Yes. And I believe you are the only person in the world who can aid me in my present predicament,"

"I can give you as much time as you need, sir."

"I'll be very grateful for that. Thanks, Morrissy."

"Say," said the janitor, "there's a fat stack of mail I've been holding for Bordman. Maybe I'd better bring it up."

"Not a bad idea."

"Anything wrong?"

"I'll let you know about that later."

Morrissy made off for Bordman's letters.

"Tell me what you know," said Armitage, turning to the young woman.

"First, what has happened? Where is Mr. Bordman?"

Her pleasant, if careworn, face and her friendly eyes gave Armitage a feeling of comfortable assurance. "What I'm going to tell you will be in absolute confidence."

"I am used to keeping secrets."

"Well, Bordman has absconded with a goodly bulk of my property."

A deep, perpendicular line formed above the young woman's nose. "Mr. Bordman? That patient, kindly little old man? It isn't possible!"

"I wish it wasn't. I shouldn't risk calling a man a thief unless I had sufficient grounds for doing so, Miss Corrigan. Please tell me what you can about him."

"I came to work as usual one morning in April and couldn't get in. I went for Morrissy and got his key. Mr. Bordman was always here at eight, and I came in at half past eight. I thought perhaps he was ill, so I called up his apartments. He had gone away the night before with a lot of luggage. It was rather odd, but I credited it to some hasty out-of-town call. I came down every day for a week; but as no news whatever came in I was forced to give up. I secured my present position. That is all I honestly know. But Mr. Bordman a thief? I can't get that through my head."

"Nevertheless, it's a fact, a bitter one to me. He sold my house, furnished, for eighty thousand in April."

"Let me think," she said, drumming on the desk with her pencil and frowning at the skyscraper across the street.

Suddenly she ran over to a shelf where there was a stack of stenographer's notebooks. After a search she plucked forth one and returned.

"What have you found?" he asked.

"I never forgot this," she answered. "I thought it rather singular and careless at the time. When you went away you left him with the power of attorney. Shall I read the articles?"

"Please."

"Right to sell and transfer real estate, bonds, stocks, mortgages, to collect rents, draw against banks, to pay current expenses against the estate. I remembered this transaction, it was so unusually broad. I witnessed the documents--for there were three duplicates for the banks--and we went next door for the notary's seal."

"Power of attorney," he murmured.

"Yes. If Mr. Bordman has robbed you..."

"I shall doubtless stay robbed," he interrupted.

"Exactly. And yet, I can't see how you can be blamed. Your father before you trusted him quite as fully. I've seen the old records. I know a little about law. I was in this office for about eight years. Whatever Bordman sold is beyond legal reach. You cannot come against the buyers. You can only follow him and make him disgorge. He was a queer little old man, with a raggedy gray mustache, partly bald, and magnifying lenses in his spectacles. But he always impressed me as being the honestest thing imaginable. He used to worry over postage stamps that didn't belong to him."

"Stock markets?"

"Impossible."

"Well, there's my nouse. But go on; give me a good picture of him."

Miss Corrigan stared out of the window again, her eyes half-closed the better to recall her impressions.

"He was frugal. I don't believe he'd been to a place of amusement in years. He had only one fad as I remember. He was always receiving folders and cabin plans from steamship companies. He was always peering over that globe there. In imagination he traveled everywhere. You will find all the queer places--the places he thought you'd go to--marked in red ink. When he wasn't poring over that globe he was deep in the encyclopedias."

Armitage nodded understandingly. Bordman had planned this day years before.

Miss Corrigan continued. "Sometimes he'd talk. You'd swear he'd been everywhere. And besides that, he was a Who's Who on New York families. You see, there wasn't much work. He handled three other estates like yours. It seems he notified those clients, transferred the papers, and so forth, the day he intended to leave. I had come to the conclusion that he had suddenly determined to retire with his savings and take one of those tremendous journeys he'd always been dreaming about."

"He's taking it--at my expense. What sort of personality?"

"Shy and kindly, and very lonely, I imagine."

"Family?"

"Never heard of any. I think he was all alone, without kith or kin."

"Never any woman came to see him?"

"Never a one."

"I'm going to ask you a big favor. I really haven't the nerve to do it myself. Here's a list of the three banks. Find out if I have anything on the books. See if this building is really still mine. I'll go out for a short walk."

"Very well, Mr. Armitage."

Armitage returned at eleven. The building was still his; but there was nothing in two banks and only about four thousand dollars in the third. On March 1st there had been two hundred and ten thousand dollars in the three banks.

"For a shy and kindly old man he seems to have done pretty well," was Armitage's ironical comment. "Have you any idea where those mortgages were kept?"

"No. The boxes at the banks are empty. They are very curious over at the banks to learn what is up. Here's the mail Morrissy brought up. Suppose we open it?" she suggested.

They sat down at the desk and opened the letters. They found twelve checks, aggregating nearly six thousand. The check was dated July, made out to the Armitage estate, its character indicated in the lower left-hand corner by the word "interest."

"Congratulations!" she said.

"Are these mine?"

"They are. Don't you understand?"

"Miss Corrigan, I'm only a benighted grasshopper."

"And a very poor business man. It means that somewhere you have a trifle over two hundred thousand dollars out in first or second mortgages. I've taken these checks over myself many times and deposited them."

Armitage did rather an unconventional thing. He seized Miss Corrigan by the shoulders and waltzed her around the room. There was a good deal of astonishment and protest in the young woman's eyes, but there was no resentment. She understood this exuberance. From the abyss of genteel poverty--her own lot--he had been wafted back to affluence, to the old order of things.

"I hope you'll forgive me. Miss Corrigan," he said, suddenly releasing her.

"It was rather unexpected." Her laughter had a break in it. There was a bit of color in her cheeks as she patted her hair.

"Where can I find a sign-painter?" he asked.

"A painter?"

"Yes. I'm going to rub out that 'Bordman' and substitute 'Armitage.' I've got some eggs left in the basket, and maybe I'm not going to watch them hereafter! I'm coming down here regularly every morning. I'm going to learn how the ant does it. My grasshopper days are over. I wonder if we can get into that safe."

"Wait a moment," said Miss Corrigan. Once more she had recourse to the notebooks. After a few minutes she returned triumphantly. "I know the combination. I used to open the safe sometimes. Nothing of real value inside--ledgers. He gave me the combination and I wrote it down here."

They found the estate ledgers and a sealed envelope, the latter addressed in this formal legal style:

Attention James Armitage

Armitage opened it. In a neat flowing hand, with characteristic little curlicues and flourishes and shaded capitals--curiously reminding him of the script of the Declaration of Independence--Armitage read the following :

You may or may not return some day. This is against the possibility of your return. You went away with a broken heart. But hearts never break, my son; they wear out, wither, and die. So no doubt some day you will return. I confess I always rather admired you, you were so different from the run of your breed. The personalities of your father and mother were strong and individualistic, and no doubt they reacted upon your own. But somehow you never struck me as a personality, as an individual; rather you were a type. You were born to riches; you had no ordinary wish that money could not instantly supply; you seemed to be without real interest in life, bored. You were to me a cipher drawn on a blackboard; something visible through the agency of chalk, but representing--nothing. I have helped myself to half your fortune, because I am basically tender of heart. Had you been a wastrel, I should have taken everything. But the spirit in you was generous and kindly. I don't suppose you ever did a mean thing--or an interesting thing. Going into the wildernesses as you have done may teach you some sound facts regarding life. Don't worry about me. What I have done does not appear to me as a crime. I have merely relieved you of half of your responsibilities and half your boredom. I knew, the moment you turned over that power of attorney to me, what I was eventually going to do, provided you remained away long enough. Don't bother to pursue me; you would only waste your time and money.

Samuel Bordman.

"The infernal cheek of him!" cried Armitage, hotly. "But I'll keep the letter in my pocket. Whenever I feel proud of myself I'll take it out and read it. I say, Miss Corrigan, if you'll take the old job back again, it's yours at any salary you say."

Miss Corrigan was twenty-eight; she had no illusions. She looked at Armitage thoughtfully. She knew that she could trust this man absolutely; but she was not sure of herself. A great moment had come into her drab life, and resolutely she closed the door upon it.

At length she shook her head. "Thank you, Mr. Armitage, but I'll keep the job I've got."

"I'm sorry," he said, quite oblivious to the little tragedy in her smile.

CHAPTER IV

ARMITAGE decided to accept his losses silently. The swift anger, the naturally savage longing to hunt down the man who had so simply and absurdly robbed him, receded, leaving only a residue of philosophical calm, generously leavened with a sardonic humor. Perhaps, too, he was actuated by a keen idea of shame. Hue and cry would only acquaint the town with the colossal folly of one James Armitage. Moreover, Bordman had six months' leeway; and, because he was so insignificant in appearance, he would be as difficult to locate as the proverbial needle. There were a few hundred thousand individuals in the United States; the other millions were of the Bordman type. Besides, Armitage had been laughed at once before; he could not tolerate the thought of being laughed at again. The Burlinghams, the Corrigan girl and himself; the tale mustn't go any farther.

The house in Seventy-second Street was gone, doubly gone. In the first place, it had been bought and paid for in good faith; in the second place, he would have cut his hand off rather than have told that girl. Why? He asked himself this question in a kind of detached wonder. Why should he consider her? For what reason should he hold back the truth from her? After all, he had no war with her. If he told her it would only worry her, make her unhappy, without benefiting himself in the least. In law the house and all its contents were hers, and she would have no difficulty in defending her title.

From Bordman's office he proceeded to the banks and annulled the power of attorney and examined the lock-boxes in the vaults. He went back mentally to that painful epoch prior to his departure for the Orient. The mortgages had no place in his recollections. Anyhow, Bordman hadn't them; the interest checks certified that. Bordman might have left them at the Concord, among his discarded effects. Later he would obtain the right of search.

One of the bankers asked him what he had done with his big balance.

"Invested it in experience," answered Armitage, gravely.

"Foreign stock markets, eh? Well, we all have to learn," said the banker, convinced that Armitage had been fooling around the foreign bourses. "I called Bordman in after the third withdrawal. He said you wanted the money."

Summed up or simmered down, Armitage had, instead of forty thousand a year, something like twenty-four thousand. As he had seldom spent more than half his income, his life might continue along the old grooves with nothing more serious than a deep sense of irritation. He carried Bordman's letter around in his pockets for weeks, and whenever time hung heavy on his hands he reread it. He even perpetrated a mild form of forgery by copying it.

At four-thirty that afternoon his worries evaporated temporarily. He found himself on the lounge in the Burlingham library, his elbow touching Miss Athelstone's; and frequently, whenever she stirred, he caught the vague perfume of lavender. He could not keep his eyes off her.

"How could you do it?" she asked abruptly.

The unexpectedness of the question threw him off his balance for a moment. Naturally --his conscience being normal and unwarned--his first supposition was that she had seen his face the night before and now recognized him.

"How could I do what?" he countered, lamely.

"Sell all those beautiful things without reservation."

"Oh! Well, I never expected to return."

"It's all like a fairy-story to me. Nearly all my life has been spent in a convent school. And here I am, with Aladdin's lamp in my hand! True, I had a good deal of liberty. But the room I lived in was white and bare, and my appetite for lovely things was stirred keenly by what I saw in the galleries and museums. For several years I used to go on horseback into the country. My father insisted that I should grow up physically strong. Those hours on a lively horse were spells of wonderful freedom. I suppose it's in my blood to love the open. My father"--her voice softened magically with the most patent adoration-- "wanders about in all the strange nooks. To-day I'll receive a letter from Shanghai; the next one will come from Chimborazo; or he's at the emerald-mines in Bolivia or the gold-fields in Africa. I don't suppose he's ever remained in any one place more than a month, except when he's on archeological work." She laughed. "Sometimes I'm convinced that he is the Ancient Mariner, or the Flying Dutchman, or the Prince of India, condemned to wander over the face of the earth. Have you ever by chance run across him? Have you ever heard of him?"

"There's an echo to the name, but I can't place it. Besides, I'm only a big-game hunter, and he, as I understand it, goes in for ruins and tombs and excavations. I'm a know-nothing on those points. Miss Athelstone. There are only a few men like your father, and the world at large never hears of them until they discover a new Babylon; and even then the world forgets all about it day after to-morrow. What's he like?"

Her gaze wandered toward the fire, and this gave him the opportunity he had been longing for--unembarrassedly to study her beauty in detail. Beauty always attracted him strongly; a sunset on the desert, a moonrise on the Taj Mahal, a sunrise on the Himalayas--all enchanted him. What hair! It was as fine as cobweb, thick and wavy, and colored like the heart of a ripe chestnut burr. He had seen cornflower sapphires less lovely than her eyes. Her skin had the faint iridescence of pearls. He brought up these comparisons with a jerk and a stiffening of the shoulders. Come, come; this would never do. Whether or not he had loved Clare Wendell, he had suffered mightily. He must not permit this girl's beauty to get into his blood.

"My father is one of the handsomest men in the world," she said; "Hall and strong and brave. Sometimes in his letters--and I must read some of them to you--he gives me little glimpses of the hazards he finds in his path. I believe he is really a poet, for nobody but a poet could write as he does. Three or four times a year they come, fat, thick letters, almost like story-books, so crammed full of life and the expression of life are they. He drops into the nearest consulate when he writes. About four years ago I left school with a companion. He insisted that I should see the world. We went everywhere. I crossed his path a hundred times, it seemed to me, but I never caught up with him. Once I almost had him--in Singapore. There was a letter for me there. It was only two days old, they said at the consulate. I had missed a boat from Penang. In missing the boat I missed him. He had gone down to Batavia. My disappointment was so keen that I cried myself to sleep that night. I was in Naples, on my return from wandering, when I received the cable which brought me to New York. He had bought your home, and it was ready for me to occupy. But, fast as I came, once again I missed him. I found a letter--a brief one this time--explaining my finances. I had a home, bank accounts, and stocks and bonds. With the exception of the home, all had been held in trust for me for years." She smiled and looked up at him. "Can't you see how like a fairy-story it is?"

"Where is your father now?"

"He is somewhere in Yucatan, exploring an Aztec ruin. But I expect his return any time now. A funny thing happened last night. A taxicab, filled with luggage, drew up in front of the house, and I thought it was he. I sent the butler dashing out. Somebody had got the wrong number."

"That was I," said Armitage. "I'd forgotten all about selling the house, and had driven up without thinking."

"Isn't that odd! But I'm going to tell you a secret. Your house is haunted."

"Haunted? Good Heavens! You don't mean to tell me there's a ghost wandering about that I never saw or heard of?"

"Well, during May and June there were times when I felt the presence of some one. Did any one ever look intently at you from behind, so intently that you had to turn your head? Well, it was like that. But last night I nearly caught the ghost. He sneezed! He ran like a deer, and I couldn't catch him."

"You weren't afraid?" Armitage wondered if there was any color to the heat in his cheeks.

"Afraid? A little. But that doesn't matter. Three essentials in life my father has taught me--I might say, drummed into me--to fight fear, to love truth, and never to miss an opportunity to do a kind act. Your lawyer was very nice to me. He came one afternoon to see if everything was all right. I kept him to tea. He was such a funny little old man, just like a character out of Dickens, or an Italian manikin that had been left out in the rain overnight."

"That's Bordman to a dot!"

The girl's voice was exquisite. She had spoken Italian so long that her English had queer little twists to it, unexpected inflections, and her laughter, light and happy, rippled like a Sicilian shepherd's reed. Living in his home, moving among and touching those objects he had loved in the past and still had a mighty craving to see! It was all like some impossible, if alluring, dream. And where, in the name of Michelangelo, were those mortgages?

"Do you still ride?" he asked, presently. Interruptions came occasionally to break in upon their dialogue, but they picked up the threads quickly.

"Nearly every morning."

"What kind of a horse?"

"Lively. I like to feel that I am master of a strong horse."

"May I ride with you some morning?" I shall be very glad to have you. It's twice as much fun with a companion. Even the horses seem to enjoy it more. I ride from nine until eleven. The stable is near by."

"I'll be around to-morrow morning, nine sharp."

Her unaffectedness was a delight to him. Breeding, real breeding, emanated from her with the subtle perfume of an old-fashioned rose. She possessed none of those coy airs, that false reluctance, which hallmarked most of the women he had known. She frankly liked this or that, or didn't. And always there was the recurrence of the amazing thought--she lived in his house!

A hand touched his shoulder lightly, and he turned his head. Standing behind the lounge and smiling down at him was the woman who had driven him forth--and lured him back--Clare Sanderson, born Wendell.

"Jimmie Armitage!" she said. She came around and held out her hand.

Armitage rose and took it, not without some trepidation. Miss Athelstone got up also. She nodded brightly. She understood. These two were old friends. Mrs. Burlingham had given her a glimpse of the history concerning them. But before she moved off Armitage covertly compared these two women. The white peony and the rose; one was magnificent and the other was just lovely.

"I can see that you are old friends, dying to talk," said the rose.

"We are," replied the peony, taking it for granted that she was speaking the truth.

"To-morrow at nine, Mr. Armitage."

"I'll be there."

Clare sat down, and, rather reluctantly, Armitage sat down beside her. After all, he might as well have this thing over with. He could not stay in New York and go among his old friends without meeting Clare.

"I'm glad to see you home again. Betty told me this morning. I suppose you've heard?" she said, with an indicative glance at her black taffeta.

"Oh yes."

"Have you forgiven me, Jimmie?" Of course. But it was pretty tough at the start."

"I was a fool."

"So was I," he replied, not over-gallantly.

"Then you are cured?"

"Absolutely!" He said it with a smile. Did she expect to wind him around her finger again?

"Isn't that splendid! Then we can be friends like we used to be. I'm changed, Jim, and so are you. Your face shows it. If you had come to the house the next day I believe I should have married you. And now I'm glad you didn't. Let's suppose I married you. To-day both of us would be desperately unhappy. We are not mates, never in this world. I liked you as much as any man. We knew the same people, went to the same houses, and all that. You were the best-looking man of the lot and the straightest. But the kindest thing I ever did was to break with you that last moment. Aren't we human beings funny?"

"We human beings certainly are! Do you honestly mean all that?"

"I honestly do, Jim."

"Shake!" He began to feel entirely at ease. There was not the slightest tremor to his pulse. It was really all over; and Clare was a good sort. A strange exultation crept into his heart.

"Can you keep a secret?" she asked.

"Can I! Why, Clare, I'm carrying around one now that would blow up an ordinary man."

"What is it?" eagerly.

"I said I could keep a secret, not tell one."

"Oh! You've heard of Captain the Honorable George Wickliffe?"

"Oh yes," he answered, lying cheerfully. She expected that kind of answer anyhow. "I've heard of him. Englishman, isn't he?"

"Yes." Even in the old days he had found fault with her lack of humor. "Well, I've decided to marry him in December. I'm going to ask Betty to give the announcement dinner."

Armitage held out his hand again and with a smile she accepted it.

Suddenly he laughed; it was a man's laughter, deep, rollicking. She had cost him more than a quarter of a million; she had driven him into far jungles, up mountaintops, across the seven seas. Never would he quite forget those dreadful nights, the brushwood fires, and yon serene face peering at him from the embers. And he hadn't really loved her, and she hadn't loved him, and she was going to marry Captain the Honorable George Wickliffe!

Some of the women around Betty's tea-table lifted their heads. Each had a singular interpretation for that laughter:

Betty: "He couldn't laugh like that if he still loved her,"

Miss Athelstone: "What a rollicking noise! I thought at first that he might still be in love with her."

Clare: "Now, I wonder what started that?"

Armitage chuckled all the way back to the hotel. Six years gone to pot, a fortune lost, all for some one he hadn't cared about. He now understood the true significance: he had, like many another, fallen in love with love. He was free.

Shortly, he thought, he must look around for an apartment. He hated hotels; and yet the thought of living in an apartment was equally distasteful.

That night he dug his things out of the trunks and cases. A good many of them would have to go to the tailor. So he searched through the pockets. In the handkerchief pocket of his swallow-tailed coat--he hadn't worn it in six years--he found one of his own visiting-cards. On the back was scribbled: "Take mortgages down to Bordman." It all came back clearly. He now knew where those elusive mortgages were. Machiavelli and Hercules, joining forces, might recover them; but how was he, James Armitage? Of all the twisted labyrinths!

For six consecutive mornings he rode through the Park with Doris Athelstone. And for the same number of mornings he heard the splendid and variegated adventures of Hubert Athelstone. For Doris was always harking back to her favorite topic, her father. She recited excerpts from letters. Armitage grew very much interested in this extraordinary man. Ordinarily, being a man, these panegyrics would have bored him. But no man, loved as this man was, could be anything except tremendously interesting. If she loved a father in this beautiful way, how might she love a lover? Once again he pulled himself up sharp. Was he falling in love with this charming usurper? Was Bob right--the first girl he saw? He did know, however, that the happiest hour in twenty-four was this morning ride, and that the other twenty-three hours were livable because there was something to look forward to.

She was really fascinating. He had never met a woman anything like her. She was far better educated than beauty demanded. She knew all the great stories, pictures, cities; she could play and sing and paint. She had personality and magnetism. The shy gray squirrels in the Park would come and take nuts from her hands. Armitage could not get within ten feet of them.

On the morning of the sixth day, as he walked back with her from the stables, she invited him in to have a cup of coffee. The uncanny sensation as he entered that familiar hall with her unnerved him for a moment. She led him into the library and, as his glance turned to the Japanese silk tapestries, he felt a shameful warmth in his cheeks.

"Just a moment," she said. "I'll go and bring the coffee myself"; and she flew from the room.

He did not sit down, but wandered about. The old home! There was his beloved copy of Tom Sawyer. He pulled it from the shelf and thumbed it reverently. Was ever man born of woman thrust into such a situation before? And he could not tell her! He sensed the kindly shades of his father and mother beside Wm.

The old Bokhara--how many times had he lain sprawled upon it, a book between his elbows! His eyes blurred. He would drink the coffee and excuse himself. He wasn't sure of that lump in his throat. The wrath against Bordman returned headily. The cringing old scoundrel, to have dug this labyrinth!

A line from Bordman's letter came back, a line he had underscored: "You were to me a cipher drawn on a blackboard; something visible through the agency of chalk, but representing--nothing." Was that true? Was he no more than a harmless, worthless idler? The thought hurt a little.

Doris came in with the coffee. She set the salver on the reading-table and took from under her arm a photograph.

"My father. Isn't he splendid?"

The man was singularly handsome; there was a rare combination of beauty and intelligence. No wonder the girl adored him.

"Isn't he glorious? He is gray now. Can't you see the 'bravoes' in his eyes?"

"I can see them in yours," he said. "My own father was a fine chap. He and mother were the jolliest comrades. And they always made me their pal. First it was the mother; father got lonesome, I guess; and then--then I found myself alone. That was fourteen years ago."

"I never knew my mother. She died when I was born. How does it seem to you?" she asked, indicating the room. "Are you sorry you sold it?"

"Not now. But I'm really a bit choked up."

"Always remember," she said, "whenever you feel the call of it, come, whether I am here or not. Just come. Oh, how beautiful it is! Your father and mother--" She stopped; there were tears in her eyes. "Is there anything you would like--anything you used to be fond of?"

He smiled. "This old copy of Tom Sawyer. It was the first real book my mother ever gave me. You might let me have that."

"It is yours. I feel dreadfully guilty about something, and I cannot tell just what it is, I feel as if I had stolen something."

"You mustn't feel like that on my account. I never expected to return to America to live." He looked at his watch. "Half after eleven, and I'm due at the office."

She went to the door with him. Then she ran back to the window and watched him march down the street, the copy of Tom Sawyer tucked under his arm. She went into the library again and picked up the photograph of her father. Suddenly she fell upon her knees; her forehead touched the edge of the table and rested there. There was little or no sound, but the shake and heave of her shoulders told of strangled sobs, sobs that tore and twisted the brave, unhappy little heart of her.

CHAPTER V

FROM eleven until one o'clock each day Armitage sat in his office. His name was now upon the door, and he never looked at it without a tonic thrill of pride. Often it takes but little to amuse one's vanity. He was playing the game, anyhow; he was no longer a cipher in human affairs: he was something, even if infinitesimally something. It was odd, but twist away from it as he might, this new energy was primarily due to Bordman's calm unimpassioned analysis. The irony had cut deep. Bordman had rooked him thoroughly, but on the other hand the old scalawag had awakened a desire to play the game. What he had lost in money, then, he was determined to gain in character...

About his only customer was the janitor, with the usual round of complaints from tenants. Morrissy came in about noon, and together they would go over matters in detail. Plumbers and gas-fitters, meter-men and electricians, masons and tinsmiths-- there was very little poetry to the job. When Armitage undertook to serve an idea he served it thoroughly; that was in the blood. He rather enjoyed the new responsibilities. His tenants always found him courteous, albeit he was always firm.

About twenty minutes were sufficient to cover the day's work; the other hundred were devoted to the newspapers, broken dreams, and the window from which he could get a glimpse of the ceaseless flow moving north and south on Broadway, two blocks west. Sometimes he would stand over Bordman's globe and pick out the spots he had intimately known. Only a little while ago he had been in this place or that. Here he had shot his first lion, there his first black leopard, over back of Perak. Sometimes his thoughts veered to Bordman. Where had he gone with his ill-gotten fortune?

Armitage always became cynical whenever Bordman came into his mind. He recalled the old curio-dealer in one of Balzac's tales, "The Magic Skin," and how the young wastrel had wished that the old chap fall in love with a ballerina. He never could quite separate Bordman from the idea that some one had accompanied him on his journey. There was no fool like an old fool. Every day in the year the newspapers had some story of this caliber. When a young woman enters the life of an old man there is no folly inconceivable. She would probably pick his pockets some day, and retribution would come in for its own.

Promptly at one Armitage left the office, changing his restaurant frequently for fear that he might fall into the old habit of going certain rounds until he became so bored that Wanderlust might not be denied, for all that at present New York held him in the strongest thrall.

The rainy season had fallen upon the town by the end of October. There were no more gallops through the Park. But there were occasions when he drove Doris about town in his recently purchased runabout. It was rare sport teaching her how to drive. She was always alive with interest.

A child's interest. He did not notice the strange silences that often fell upon her. There were a certain restraint and demureness in these spells that would have interested Betty Burlingham.

One Saturday, as he rocked in his creaky swivel chair, smoking his strong pipe and dreaming pleasantly, the door swung open and Betty and Doris swept in, bright of eye and rich in color, for a cold northeaster was blowing. He was on his feet instantly.

"Well, this is a pleasure!"

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Betty. "We came at this hour because we thought you might ask us out to lunch."

"I thought perhaps you might be looking for an office. There's one to rent."

Betty perched herself upon a corner of the desk, while Doris strolled about. She paused at the globe, and with the tip of her finger sent it spinning upon its axis.

"How do you like work?" asked Betty, pushing the still smoking pipe to the farthest end of the desk. "I don't see why we women marry you men, you have such horrid habits. But never mind. How are you making out?"

"Great! I can tell a plumber from a mason at a glance. I can tell a book agent from a charity-worker by the smile alone."

"Into what class do you put us?" asked Doris, giving the globe a final spin as she turned away.

"Angels from heaven!"

"We'll certainly fly if you talk like that. And so this is the place where that funny little agent of yours used to work? What has become of him?"

"He was getting along in years and concluded to retire," said Armitage, reaching for his pipe and putting it into a drawer mechanically and wondering all the rest of the day what he had done with it.

Betty stared at her hands because she was afraid to trust her eyes.

"He was very quaint," said Doris, innocent of the bomb fuse she had lighted. "Can you write on the typewriter?"

"I can pick out Yankee Doodle, but that's about all. It's twelve," he said, briskly. The sight of Doris in this office rather embarrassed him. "Any place in mind for lunch?"

"Yes. We want to go where there's dancing. Doris hasn't seen that phase of New York life yet. Bob's too busy to come up-town, and so we thought you might help us out."

"All right. But I'm as much in the dark as Miss Athelstone. You'll have to do the guiding, Betty. How'd you come?"

"Subway. We've been shopping all the morning. Doris wants a new dress for that dinner I'm going to give Clare. The Honorable George is very nice. Clare is in luck."

"So am I," said Armitage.

"It will be my first real dinner. I'm so excited!" Doris came close to the desk. "How nice and kind you people are to me! Some one told me once that a person might live and die in New York and not know a single neighbor."

"That's true enough," said Armitage, getting into his coat. "But on this especial occasion you moved in next to the nicest lady but one in this world."

"And just who is the nicest?" Betty demanded; but she was thinking, "What a stupendous, scrumptious thing that would be!" For, now that Armitage had signified his intention of settling down and becoming a stay-at-home, she must search around among the younger women to find him a suitable wife. A normal married woman can no more tolerate a handsome eligible bachelor than she can tolerate poison in the nursery. Armitage's doom was sealed then and there. And what appealed to Betty most strongly was the fact that it would be the most romantic thing she had ever heard of.

A pleasant hour and a half was idled away at one of the popular restaurants on Broadway. There was a little dancing, just enough to show Armitage that he had entirely lost track of the game. But Doris was interested. Her little feet kept patting time to the music. She confessed that she had never known the exhilaration of a waltz. And Armitage, gazing at her beauty, considered that it would be an exceedingly pleasurable task to be her instructor.

An idea formed and grew in his head, too; it haunted him all the rest of the day, followed him into bed that night, and made havoc of his dreams. Thereafter this idea became an obsession. Arguments were out-argued and logic had its legs knocked from under. He fought it, denied it, forswore it, but always, like the north wind, the idea returned. It grew like the genie free of the bottle; and he knew that in his case he never could coax it back into the bottle again. I don't suppose he would have changed his plans even if he could have seen what was forward--the bullet that was nearly to write "Finis" to his pleasant if rather checkered career.

Rather a peculiar thing happened at the dinner Betty Burlingham gave to Clare to announce her engagement to Wickliffe. After dinner and the solemn announcement that Clare was ready to risk her liberty once more, there was dancing in the big drawing-room. Doris, of course, did not dance--that is, not well enough to risk a flight across the glistening floor. She and Armitage watched the dancers for a while. Suddenly she leaned toward him.

"Let's go home," she said in a whisper.

The suggestion hypnotized him; the phrase was so intimate and companionable. Home, her home and still his! For it was his morally, no matter how well legally she might be intrenched there. Arabian Nights! They stole out unobserved.

But no sooner were they in the house next door than he saw the monumental folly of his act. "We'd better run right back," he said, gravely.

"But why?"

He covered his confusion. "Well, they'll be missing us shortly. Betty has Argus eyes."

"But what if they do miss us?" she asked, innocently.

"How the dickens am I going to make her understand?" he thought.

"Come into your old study. There's a fire ready. And I've got the most wonderful surprise for you. I was going to give it to you some morning after our ride, but the weather's been too bad."

"We'd better march right back to Betty's."

"Don't you... Wouldn't you like to stay?"

"Like to! Why... that isn't it." How was he going to tell her that it was not proper to be with her in this house at this hour? He saw instantly that, whatever she knew about social conventions, the present situation was not clear to her. The innocent! He arraigned himself bitterly.

Whatever his resolves, these were negated by an unexpected action on her part. She laughed, caught him by the sleeve, and ran with him into the study.

"I planned all this this afternoon," she confessed. She turned, struck a match, and threw it into the grate.

"Now, sir, you sit perfectly still. You know all the nooks in this room. Study them out while I go. I'll be right

back."

Never had he met such a woman, and she was a woman. She was at least twenty-two. In many things she was uncannily wise, in others as innocent as a child. And the exquisite lure of her lay in these two opposites. Never had he struck a happier phrase: pearl and pomegranate and Persian peach--jewels and fruit. She made him think of summer clouds, so lightly she moved. She made him think of his loneliness, too. He did not know then that his thought of loneliness was a dangerous one. "Let's go home; The thrill of it!"

He leaned back against the cushions, as he had leaned a thousand times before. By now the fire had got into the chestnut log, and everything was touched by the rosal light. Four weeks; he had known her just about four weeks. Her father's picture stood on the mantel, and he wondered how a man with such a daughter could lead such a life. There was a bit of mystery around the man somewhere.

This spot had always been Armitage's favorite. He had invariably smoked a pipe here after dinner, before going out for the evening. He fell into a dream. Supposing he was really living here again, and this child-woman who had unconsciously thrown about him an irresistible enchantment.... He heard the rustle of her gown, and she was standing before him, her hands behind her back, a tantalizing smile on her lips.

"La mano destra--la sinistra?" she asked. "Which hand?"

"The one nearest the heart"--recalling an old game of his youth.

She thrust forth her left hand. It held a brown meerschaum pipe!

"Where did you find that?"

"In a corner of the bookcases. Oh, there are signs of you all over the house. There was a sealed tobacco-jar. Take the pipe and light it. I'm going to read you some of daddy's letters. "

"But the odor of pipe tobacco?"

"I smelled a pipe the first day I entered the house, and nobody but a caretaker has been in it for years. It will always be in the curtains. Light it."

He obeyed. In truth he would have obeyed her had she asked him to take a live log from the grate with his bare hands. He did not comprehend what was happening to him.

She took an Oriental pillow--Scheherazade herself might have called upon it once upon a time--from the lounge and dropped it between the fire and the lounge and sat down, cross-legged. She untied a bundle of letters and selected three or four. Her gown was emerald-green. On the side nearest him her throat and cheek reflected the green; on the other side the flames tinted her with rose. Her arms and shoulders were, in these changeful lights, more wonderful than any marble he had ever seen.

Oh, this must be some dream, a recurrence of some fragment he had read in a forgotten book. Presently she would vanish, his old butler would touch him on the shoulder, he would rub his eyes for a moment, and then go down to the club. The life in the jungles was a dream also--green and rose, like a cloud on the face of a stream. He longed to reach down and touch her, to assure himself that she was real. Here in his house!

She began to read. At the sound of her voice he lowered his pipe and never put it to his lips again that night. Think of her finding his pipe! Sometimes a beautiful line caught his attention; but to-night his ears were keyed to music and not to words.

The French ormolu clock struck twelve-- the faithful old watchdog of his childhood. Twelve o'clock! The many times his mother had said: 'Time for bed, Jimmiekins!' Doris had finished the last letter and was doing up the packet. "Isn't he wonderful?" she looked up, her eyes full of marvel.

"Very." But he hoped she would not ask him what he thought of this passage or that. He could not remember a single line!

"Did you ever know that floors talk in the night?" she asked. She possessed the queerest fancies.

"What do they say?" He glanced anxiously at the clock.

"There's a board over there, just this side of the curtains, that is always yawning and saying, 'Oh, dear!' There's another in the middle hall that says, 'Look sharp!' And I always walk around it. There's the funniest old grumbler in my room. I can't get it to say anything; it just mumbles and grumbles. The one in your room says, 'Lonesome! Lonesome!' And the storeroom has one that says, 'Hark!' so sharply that I always stop and listen. I suppose it's because I'm not used to wooden floors."

"And because I don't believe you're a real human being at all, only just a fairy."

"Well, perhaps." She rose and faced him suddenly. "Am I different? I mean, am I different from your friends? Do I do things I oughtn't? Why did you want to go back?"

"I didn't. I only felt I ought to."

She wrinkled her forehead, trying to decipher this. "I speak English like anybody else, but sometimes I don't understand... Santa Maria! There goes the bell!"

"It's Burlingham probably, come after us." And Bob would doubtless take Jimmie Armitage's head off for this night's work.

"AU right. But wasn't it fun!"

"Hello!" said Burlingham as they opened the door. "Thought you'd be here. Jillie has just dropped in to play the violin for us. He's come straight from his concert. Mighty fine of him. He charges a thousand a night for those who consider him a fad of the hour and gives away his genius to those he knows love music. Come along."

"A violin?" Doris threw her cloak over her shoulders. "Isn't it wonderful! Floors that talk and little red-brown boxes with singing souls!"

Armitage's anxiety grew. He knew Bob's voice of old, and Bob was deeply angry about something; and Armitage suspected readily enough what this something was. Hang the world with its right-and-left angles, its fussy old hedges and barricades!

"Smoke a cigar with me when they all go," whispered Burlingham in the vestibule of his own house.

It was half after two in the morning when Armitage found himself alone with Bob and his wife. Bob lighted a cigar and walked about for a space.

"I don't know how it came to pass, but Betty and I have grown very fond of that girl next door. We've formed a kind of protectorate over her. She puzzles us. She's a type we haven't run into before. She is both worldly wise and surprisingly innocent. She'll air her views of monogamy one moment and then ask why a woman shouldn't go to a restaurant alone at night if she wanted to. We know why she can't. Cities and men have made

it impossible."

"Don't beat about the bush with me, Bob. You're angry because I went over there the way I did."

"Why the dickens did you do it, then?"

"Don't you folks trust me?" Armitage asked, rather pathetically.

"We'd trust you anywhere, Jim, in any situation," said Betty. "That isn't it."

"I understand. I was simply hypnotized. What do you suppose she said to me? 'Let's go home!' When I followed her I did not realize what I was doing. I'm a bit tangled up still. I don't know whether I'm happy or miserable. 'Let's go home!' Think of her saying that to me! Think of going over with her to my house! I shall never be able to look upon it as anything but mine. Think of her finding an old pipe of mine and offering it to me! I've been wandering through labyrinths ever since I struck New York."

"What are you driving at?" demanded Burlingham.

"Hush!" said Betty,

Armitage went on L if he had not heard the interruption: "When I followed her to-night I did not comprehend until I got into the house and she began reading her father's letters to me. Then I knew. I followed her because it was written that I should... all the rest of my days."

CHAPTER VI

ARMITAGE walked back to the hotel. The wind was bitter and there was a dash of rain in it. But he minded neither the wind nor the rain nor the long walk. There are times when the mind is so busy that physical weariness and discomfort are unnoticeable.

He was astounded and miserable and distressed. Not because he had fallen in love with Doris Athelstone. Propinquity made such a thing more or less inescapable. It was not that he had fallen in love with her; it was because he could fall in love with her. He doubted himself. He was miserable and unhappy because he did not believe that he was capable of loving deeply.

He had felt almost exactly the same as on that day Clare Wendell had become the sum of his existence. He had been telling himself for days that he hadn't loved Clare at all; when faced honestly he had loved her, only, as Bob said, he had got over it. There you were, the crux of it. What did getting over it signify? That he was not capable of sustained love? Supposing it was just the novelty of the situation in which he found himself? Supposing he told Doris he loved her, and they married, and afterward....

And yet there was a difference between this new love and the old. There had been the pride of youth in the first affair; in this one only a deep and tender longing to shield and protect. It could not be the grand passion; his blood did not bound at the thought of Doris as it had at the thought of Clare. All he wanted was to hold Doris close in his arms. He did not have a perception of that former desire to go forth into the world and conquer something, to shout his joy at everybody.

Armitage was intensely honest. He wanted this to be right; he wanted to be absolutely positive that this love was the real love, something that would sweep on calmly like a great river, not like a noisy, gay little brook that would suddenly pop into the ground and disappear, nobody knew why or where. He saw the obscurities through which he must go; the whimsical charm of this lovely child-woman, her loneliness and the mystery which enshrouded her. He wasn't sure that her very singular presence in his own home hadn't caused the amazing upheaval of his senses. The picture of her sitting there before the fire returned so vividly, just there in front of him, that he veered a little, actually, for fear he might step into or onto the picture. "Let's go home!" So long as he lived he would never forget the tone in which she had spoken those magical words.

The long walk solved nothing. The riddle was all around him when he entered the hotel and asked for his key. He was drenched with cold rain, too, and the nap of his silk hat was ruined beyond recall.

He did not see Doris again for three days, though he talked to her once a day over the telephone. He wanted to fight his doubts to a conclusion before he saw her again.

But each night, somewhere around nine o'clock, he patrolled the opposite side of the street, watching the windows of what had once been an ordinary, unlovely brownstone, but which was now worthy of a site in the ancient city of Bagdad.

On the third night he awoke to the astonishing fact that his vigils were being shared by another. Almost directly in front of the house stood a fire-box. A man leaned against it. He remained motionless for fully an hour; then he walked away. Armitage had noticed him on the previous nights, but casually. To-night, however, the singularity of the event stirred him into the realization of the fact that yonder individual was watching the house. As the man started to walk away Armitage ran across, hailing:

"Just a moment there, if you please!"

The man stopped.

"Are you watching that house?" demanded Armitage.

"What's that to you?" countered the stranger, calmly.

"A good deal perhaps. A little while ago I owned that house, and I am still rather attached to it. I know its present owner. Consequently I feel that I have a right to inquire into your actions. "

"You are Mr. Armitage?"

"I am."

"Thanks. Good evening."

The stranger began to walk away again, but this time Armitage caught him roughly by the sleeve.

"You will explain to me, or I'll hand you over to the police."

The man threw back the lapel of his coat and displayed a silver badge.

"You are a detective?"

"I am. Satisfied?"

"I certainly am not. What I demand to know is the meaning."

"And I don't propose to tell you."

"Let me see that badge again."

The stranger complied. The badge was the insignia of a famous private detective agency.

"If you want to ask any more questions, Mr. Armitage, go down to the office and ask them of the chief. Good night."

Armitage did not detain him further, but moodily watched him until he vanished around the first corner. A detective, and watching the house every night! What could that possibly mean? Here was a mystery that must be investigated at once.

So he called upon the agency the following morning. He was kept waiting in the reception-room for nearly an hour, which ruffled his temper considerably. When at length he was shown into the chief's office he went at the subject rather undiplomatically.

"Mr. Armitage, this is none of your business," he was bluntly told.

"I believe I can make it my business."

"How?" imperturbably, "You no longer have any legal interest in that house."

Armitage thought for a moment. "Supposing I should tell you that I had?"

"Will you be good enough to explain?"

"I'll explain fully if I have your word that my explanation will not go beyond that door."

The chief twisted his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other.

"Go ahead. A confidence in this office is inviolable."

When Armitage completed his tale the chief threw up his hands.

"Sold the house and skipped with the cash! Well, I thought I knew every trick on the calendar, but this certainly is a new one to me. Why don't you fight it?"

"The girl's father bought the house in good faith. The only hope I have is to get to Bordman."

"We could find him for you."

"I don't want the present incumbent to know anything about it."

"Some world, isn't it? What do you want to know?"

"Why your men are watching that house."

"Rest assured that we are her friends also."

"But what's the object?"

"I'll tell you what, Mr. Armitage. I'll admit that you have just a little moral right to ask questions. I am acting in the interests of my client, who is wholly within his rights. Our actions mean no harm to the young lady you are interested in. Quite the contrary."

"Well, how long has this espionage been going on?"

"Since the purchase of the house. This office is always on the side of law and justice. The young lady is not in any danger whatever. In fact, she knows nothing."

"Suppose I acquaint her with the fact?"

"That's rather a poser. Our orders are that she must not know."

"Satisfy all my doubts, and she shall know nothing from me."

"Until January first we are her legal guardians, as you might say. Our business is to see that her servants are honest, what they do and how they act, to note who comes and goes, where she goes and what she does and with whom she makes friends, and to send in our report fortnightly."

"Her father?"

"There you have touched the queer side of this affair. I don't know who my client is. A fat certified check was sent to us in April with instructions. Our client knew what our terms were, and the check covered everything up to January first. Our reports are sent to the Italian consulate in New Orleans, whence no doubt they are forwarded to our client's actual address. You have figured in a number of these reports, Mr. Armitage. And there you are. Since this is an honorable affair, open and aboveboard, we have naturally made no attempt to ascertain either the name or the address of our client; but, like yourself, we suspect him to be her father."

"I am perfectly satisfied," said Armitage. "If I was a bit abrupt, my apologies."

"Don't let that worry you. The job has had us all thinking. We didn't know but the young lady was in some unknown danger. You spoke of her father. Who is he? We know his name, of course, but not what he is."

"Hubert Athelstone, an explorer and archeologist."

Reaching for Who's Who, the chief searched diligently among the A's. He shook his head and pressed a button. "The English Who's Who," he said to the clerk. But the second search was equally fruitless. "That doesn't really matter. An archeologist has to discover a king's tomb to get into those books. On the other hand, he's pretty sure to be a member of the Royal or National Geographical Society. Come with me into the next room; I've got a real library in there."

But Hubert Athelstone belonged neither to the Royal nor to the National; he was an outsider.

Doris grew tired of tossing on her pillows. So she got out of bed, put on her peacock kimono, her slippers, and sat down on the hassock by the window in the dark. The first real storm was making headway. Beyond the street lamp the flakes were feathery white, this side they were black and shadowy. She wondered what time it was.

She was very unhappy. She was always comparing her own existence with that of those about her. The Burlinghams were nice and their friends were nice, but her association with them only strengthened her sense of loneliness. They all had "people," and most of them had known one another since childhood. She had no such friendships. She had formed friendships during her school days, but all these had been broken and never reformed. Those occasional visits from parents! How she had watched the greetings, sadly, with an envy that would not be smothered! And the holiday boxes! Regularly she used to receive a check. But checks could come any time; there was nothing Christmasy about slips of paper that represented money. She had wanted boxes like the others, and boxes had never come.

Still, she had been happy in those days. Beautiful Florence! The irises in the spring up the road to Fiesole, the afternoon drives in the lovely Cascine, and the rides into the Tuscany hills! Il grillo!--the lucky crickets! Each Maytime she had gone with her companions into the park and caught a singing cricket for luck and put him into a funny little wire cage, and night after night he would saw away at his fiddle (whether in rage or in happiness she never knew) until she set him free. Il grillo! That's what the Sisters had called her.

She choked and rested her head on the cold window-sill--and raised it almost instantly. Somewhere in the house the floors, the wooden floors, were talking. She listened intently. The sound came from above, directly overhead, from the storeroom on the servants' floor. "Hark!" it said; and after a little while it said, "Hark!" again. Some one was in the storeroom.

She rose to her feet, went over to her bureau, and armed herself with an electric torch and a small automatic. She then opened her door carefully and stepped out into the hall. There was enough light from the front window to guide her to the stairs. She was afraid, but she went on. Hadn't her father always told her to go on when she felt fear? To love truth was easy, to be kind was equally easy; but this thing called fear, which insisted upon recurring, which must be conquered and reconquered eternally! A draught of cold air struck her. She was conscious of it, but did not pause to investigate the source.

She mounted the stairs slowly and lightly. She did not want any of them to call out a warning, though they were all more or less talky, these stairs. She held the torch in her left hand and the automatic in her right, tensely. Her knees were shaking and she possessed a great longing to run back to her room and hide under the bedclothes. But that invisible force which had always been behind her--a compelling pride in the observance of her father's laws of conduct-- made it impossible for her to turn. What if he should learn some day that she

had run away in a crisis? So she went on, the bravest of the brave.

In her travels she had learned how to use firearms--another injunction which had been laid down by that imperialistic parent of hers. She could shoot passably, but always in horror if at some living target.

She decided to move in the dark, not to turn on the light of the torch until the very last moment.

The storeroom door was open. There was a wide circle of light on the ceiling. A shadow rather than a human being crouched before the wall. She saw a black square hole. A safe in the wall! Here was a thief, taking something that doubtless belonged to Mr. Armitage. For her own sake she was a bit of a coward, but for the sake of some one she liked she was as brave as a lion. Click! went the key on her torch.

"Stand up!"

The burglar, a cap drawn over his eyes and a dark handkerchief hiding the lower half of his face, obeyed--less in terror than in fascination--and silently drew back from a box he had withdrawn from the safe. There was enough illumination from his own upstanding torch to outline her face and bring out the gorgeous patterns on her kimono.

"Hold your hands out in front of you!"

Again the man obeyed.

"Come out. Now walk toward those stairs, and don't lower your arms."

At the head of the stairs the burglar was ordered to march down, warned that the slightest suspicious movement would have serious results for him. She wondered if the man understood voices. Hers wasn't anything like her own; it was dry and thin and seemed to come out of nowhere, certainly not her throat. She kept the light of her torch focused squarely upon his back.

Now these stairs were the old-fashioned, circular kind. She did not observe that the man was quietly taking two steps to her one. As he reached the beginning of the lower curve he made a swift break for liberty. Wide-eyed, she fired. The shock of the explosion caused her to drop the torch.

It bumped down the steps, casting grotesque globes of light, now on the wall, now on the ceiling, now along the spindles of the banisters, and again into her own face. Suddenly everything went dark.

CHAPTER VII

IN the bedroom of the Burlingham butler there were two buzzers, one indicating the front door and the other the rear. The tingle of one of them penetrated the butler's dreams, and he turned on his pillow and tried to bury his head in it. Louder and more insistent grew the sound until it penetrated his consciousness, Edmonds awoke and sat up in bed. He was not in an amiable frame of mind. Possibly he swore at the bell. He turned on the light, eying malevolently the two bells above his door. Who, in the name of mischief, could be at the rear door this time of night?

He put on his dressing-gown and slipshods and started down the rear stairs, pressing the light buttons as he went. He paused at the rear door, listening. He could still hear the buzzer going. He unchained the door and opened it slightly.

"Edmonds, that you? Let me in."

"Who is it?"

"Armitage. I guess I'm a bit hurt."

Edmonds swung open the door, and the man lurched in.

"Good Heavens, sir!"

"Better call Bob."

Armitage hauled a chair over to the sink and sat down. With his right hand he lifted his left arm--singularly inert--and rested it in the sink.

Edmonds did not have to summon his master. Bob had also heard the bell. He met the butler at the pantry door.

"What's all this racket, Edmonds?"

"Mr. Armitage, sir. Says he's hurt."

Burlingham rushed out into the kitchen.

"Jim, what on earth's happened?"

"Bullet through the fleshy part of my arm. Nothing serious, but rather messy. It's my ankle that really bothers me. Get me some bandages, will you, old scout? I've lost considerable blood."

"But what's happened?"

"Put your hand inside my coat. Yes, that's the pocket,"

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Burlingham. "The mortgages!"

"Wall safe in the old storeroom. Happened to remember. All my mother's jewels, too. Pockets filled."

"Who shot you?"

"She did. Plucky, but frightened."

Burlingham groped around for a chair and plumped down into it.

"You infernal jackass!" he gasped. "Edmonds, go get Mrs. Burlingham, and tell her to bring the medicine-chest, lints, and bandages."

"Yes, sir." The butler hurried off as fast as his slipshods would permit.

"You blockhead! Suppose she had killed you?" Burlingham pushed the hair out of his eyes.

"Well, she didn't." Armitage smiled.

"Jim, I always credited you with a normal allotment of brains. This is murderous folly. One of a dozen things might have happened. You might have hurt her."

"But I didn't. Bob, I had to get those mortgages. Two of them fall due next month. And the jewels; always had a haunting idea that old Bordman might come back. Can't you see I had to do it this way?"

"Why didn't you explain to her? She would have gladly given you anything in the house."

"That's true enough. But I've mulled over the thing for days. What would she think of a man selling a house with a fortune locked up in a secret wall safe? She would think it queer that the agent hadn't said something about it. She would begin to think that something was wrong, and sooner or later she would find out. She's always saying that she still doesn't understand how I came to sell the house, anyway."

"And so you played burglar, risked her life perhaps as well as your own; in fact, risked jail and the very explanations you are seeking to avoid. And she shot you!" Burlingham raised his hands toward heaven, or the ceiling, which was nearer. "If you aren't stark crazy!"

"I'm not defending myself. Besides"-- a bit truculently-- "it's my own business."

"Yes, a fine business! She'll notify the police. Your footprints in the snow will be traced to my door. Solid ivory! Your arm will be in a sling for days, if blood poisoning doesn't set in. When she sees you she won't have the slightest suspicion. She wouldn't have questioned your right to open that safe. You could have told her that you had forgotten it in the deal. You were thousands of miles away, and all that. She would have been glad to help you. And now you've bailed up the whole thing."

"How?"

"The other night you told us that you loved her, or words to that effect. Her idea of truth and honor is a wonderful thing; and if she finds out what you have done, even if she returned your love, she will always look upon you with a kind of horror. A double horror. She'll always be picturing in her mind what would have happened if she had killed you. Oh, you've done a fine and noble thing! You ought to be locked up in a lunatic asylum. That you, Betty? Jim's hurt a little."

"What has happened?"

Burlingham briefly recounted the adventure. If he expected a storm of reproaches from Betty his expectations did not materialize. Instead, she was all silence and tenderness because, somehow, she got farther below the surface of the affair than her husband. She was not impervious to romance, especially romance of this rather wild and unusual sort. She intuitively adjusted herself to Armitage's point of view.

"I'll run down to Atlantic City," said Armitage as they led him to one of the guestrooms. "I know how to handle wounds. I've been mauled more than once by the big cats. Am I a fool, Betty?"

"Of a kind, but not Bob's kind."

"Sorry to cause you all this trouble, but I had to do it my way. I couldn't make Durston's grille with this ankle. You see, I couldn't keep it out of my head what would happen if she found out that my home had not been sold legally, and her father five thousand miles away. She might have run away to find him."

"On the contrary," declared Burlingham,

"she would have written him and brought him home, and the whole business would have been neatly ironed out. What do you say, Betty?"

"I'm not going to say anything. I only know that Jim's hurt and unhappy. And, wrong or right, the thing is done."

Armitage left at six in a taxicab the next morning. This early hour was chosen in order to prevent anybody next door observing his departure. His arm ached dully and no doubt would cause him discomfort for some days to come. It was his ankle that bothered him most. He went straight to his hotel, and with the aid of a waiter packed a grip and started for Atlantic City.

He received a letter from Betty two days after his arrival, and the contents rather bewildered him. Doris had not said a word about his midnight adventure. Why? It was utterly out of the question that she could have recognized him. Why, then, did she not confide in Betty?

For ten days he fussed and fumed, harried hotel waiters, bullied the clerks, rode endless miles in wheel-chairs, started a dozen novels and finished none, smoked himself headachy, all with the vague presumption that he was hurrying the clock. On the day he could eat with two hands he paid his bill and returned to New York.

One thing had been accomplished by this enforced inactivity. He had rid his mind of all those agonizing doubts. He loved. He knew now wherein lay the difference between this love and the former one. All shades became apparent to him now, as easily distinguishable as artificial light from the splendor of dawn.

His first inclination, upon leaving the station, was to drive up to the house at once. But he fought the desire successfully. No more harebrained ideas; henceforth he must sail his bark along normal channels. He wanted Doris Athelstone above all things on earth, but he must have patience.

There was one peculiar phase. What doubts he had dismissed were those concerning his own love, its depths and trueness. Never had it entered his head that Doris might not care. It was not egotism, for Armitage lacked that insufferable attribute, and always had. Perhaps later the thing would confront him that Doris might have other ideas regarding her future. But at this period that doubt had no comer in his thoughts. Beyond the fact that he loved Doris with all his heart there was nothing clear.

In his room at the hotel there was a stack of mail. He was still doddering over the apartment idea. He detested the confusion of hotel life. He was no longer gregarious. True, he craved companionship, but not in droves. There were many invitations in the mail. People he had known formerly were beginning to recall him. All save one of these invitations he cast into the wastebasket. This invitation gave him a tingle of genuine pleasure. He was invited to meet a mighty hunter, a man he had known at Nairobi, in British East Africa; that very evening, too. A bit of real luck. Chittenden, the dramatic critic, whom he knew but indifferently, was the host. The affair would begin after a theater party; beer and skittles and no petticoats.

Armitage laid this aside and turned to the telephone. After some irresolution he unlatched the receiver. Presently a voice came over the wire. "Hello!" Always three inflections; when she spoke it, it was like a caress. His hand shook.

"It is I, Armitage."

"Oh! When did you return?" said the voice.

"About an hour gone."

"It's nice of you to call me up."

He waited, but the invitation did not come. "Could I come up to tea this afternoon?"

"Oh, I'm sorry! I am going out with Mrs. Burlingham."

"To-morrow, then?"

"Yes."

"Good-by."

He hung up the receiver and stared at it for some time. What was the matter? Somehow her voice sounded odd. The old spontaneity was lacking. Generally she bubbled over the telephone. He did not dare ask himself questions.

That afternoon he went over to the office and pottered around uselessly, accomplishing nothing. About three o'clock he called up Betty, rather guiltily. Yes, she and Doris were going to a reception. He might have known that Doris would answer him frankly. Still, there was that lack of bubbling, and it meant something.

He was glad when midnight came around and he made off for Chittenden's. He knew the critic casually, but he had never been in his apartments, rather famous in their way.

The rooms, when he arrived, were already thick with tobacco smoke. Pipes and cigars and cigarettes were going full tilt. There were about thirty men in the gathering--writers, dramatists, artists, and actors, many of them celebrated.

The great hunter espied Armitage and bored through group after group. The greeting was quiet, as it always is between two men who have known each other in stress. They fell to talking lions and tigers and black panthers or leopards until they had quite a gallery about.

During a lull Armitage idly inspected the walls. They were literally covered with photographs, all sizes and all ages, theatrical people, from Garrick down to the idol of the day. In a shadowy comer he saw one that drew him with something more than idle curiosity. There was something familiar about it. It hung just above the top of the wall lounge. It was in this obscure place doubtless because it was more or less unimportant among such a galaxy.

As he knelt upon the lounge for a closer scrutiny he felt thunder in his ears. He remained kneeling there, in an unchanging attitude, for several minutes, until a hand fell upon his shoulder. He turned.

"What interests you so intently?" asked Chittenden.

"That photograph. Who is it?"

Chittenden took the photograph from the wall and looked at the back.

"Daniel Morris, an old-timer. Rather pathetic story. Died in 1870, on the morning after his first appearance in New York. For ten years he had struggled to get into New York, and then to die when he got here!"

"He is really dead?"

"Oh yes. They found him dead in his bed the next morning. He certainly was a handsome beggar, and would have become a great actor had he lived. I don't suppose there is another photo of him extant. Come on into the dining-room and have a nip."

But Armitage declined. As soon as he found the opportunity he got his hat and coat and left. He wanted to be alone so that he could think clearly. Chittenden ought to know. If he said the man was dead, he certainly was dead. Armitage went at the puzzle from all possible angles. It was impregnable. Daniel Morris. The same face, the same identical photograph he knew as that of Hubert Athelstone!

CHAPTER VIII

ARMITAGE walked as men walk in nightmares. He bumped into pedestrians and jarred his knees in stepping off curbs blindly. He wasn't going anywhere; he was just walking. The same identical photograph, the same pose! Daniel Morris --Hubert Athelstone! Morris had actually died in 1870. Twins? Had the pose in one photograph differed from the pose in the other, the supposition might have had weight. No, no; there was something monumentally wrong about this affair; and there didn't seem any way of solving it. The two photographs were identical; there was no getting away from the cameo stickpin in the tie. Anyhow, it was not possible that the man in the photograph was Doris's father. He had died in 1870. Armitage computed the years. Had he lived he would be seventy-five, a tottering old man, whose greatest exploit would be to walk down to the corner once a day for his tobacco. All these cogitations served merely to bring Armitage back to the beginning of the circle.

Where should he go? He could not go on wandering all over New York; and yet he knew he would not sleep if he went to the hotel. He looked about with seeing eyes for the first time, and recognized the locality. He was within a block of the office. Good! He would go up there and try to figure it out. He felt in his pocket and was pleased to find that he was carrying his keys. He would smoke his pipe, pace, and think.

The same photograph, absolutely the same!

He entered the Armitage, still brooding, and mounted the stairs. He had fallen again under the spell of hypnosis. His actions were mechanical. He stooped before the door to insert the key--and straightened up, galvanized. Lights! He had walked squarely up to the door without noticing the lights! Had he turned them on accidentally that morning? Or had the scrubwoman forgotten to turn them off? He looked at his watch. It was nearly two. He turned the key and pushed in the door. But he did not cross the threshold immediately.

Seated at the desk, with his head on his arms, was a man. All that Armitage could see was the shape of the head and a few straggling wisps of drab hair. Armitage waited, confused as to how to act. Finally he stepped over to the desk, laid a hand firmly on the sleeper's shoulder, and pulled him back to an upright position. His hand fell away suddenly.

The stranger was Bordman.

"You?" cried Armitage, stormily.

"I must have fallen asleep," said Bordman, softly. "I didn't know that I could ever fall asleep again."

"Of all the colossal nerve! Bordman, I'm going to have you locked up just as soon as I can get the police here," declared Armitage as he picked up the telephone.

"It is too late."

"Not by many hours!"

"I am dying."

Armitage set down the telephone. He looked down into the face of his despoiler. The cavernous eyes, burning like agate, the shining cheek-bones, the hollow cheeks, the veil of drabness over all--Armitage was forced to admit that the man was ill.

"I am dying. After all, it is a happy way out.... I came up here... because the few happy hours I've known in years were spent in this room.... I could not die down there.... And God has brought you here at this hour!"

Armitage felt his wrath fade as a breath on a mirror fades. He was stirred by a strange compassion. It hadn't paid, then? The old scoundrel hadn't been able to get any pleasure out of his ill-gotten spoils? The way of the transgressor! He was patently in a pitiable condition.

"Shall I call a doctor?"

"Well... if you wish."

Armitage took up the telephone again. He was able to rout out an old friend of the family, who volunteered to come at once to the office.

"It didn't pay, Bordman. It didn't pay, did it?"

"No. And so I came back... here."

"Where you hatched your abominable crime."

"Abominable.... Yet, I divided with you. You are still in comfortable circumstances. You are on the way to become a man"--with an ironical smile.

"But my home--the things I treasured! You robbed me and cheated the other man."

"No doubt I am one of the damned."

Bordman spoke as if carefully guarding his voice, his breath. "Let us be calm. Don't excite me.... Another hemorrhage and I am done for; and I must make use of my time.... Conscience is a strange thing. It drove me; I could not resist it.... So here I am."

"I forgive you, Bordman, if that will ease you any."

"You... forgive?"

"Yes. Only, you must restore what you took, or what is left of it. What a joke! You rooked me. I ought to curse you, and yet I feel more inclined to bless you."

The old man's lips moved, but no sound came through them.

"In your debt!" went on Armitage, a bit wildly. "For if you hadn't rooked me, there would never have come into my life-- love! A bit of thistledown with a soul--a fairy, turned into a human being, still retaining the fairy's mind!"

"The other... the one who made you run away?" whispered Bordman.

"Lord! she doesn't exist! The more I think of it the more I'm certain that I'm in your debt. But for you I'd never have known her--the daughter of the man you sold the house to. Bordman, you saw that man. What's the matter with him that he doesn't appear on the scene? What's he done? If I had a daughter like that, no earthly treasures would or could keep me from her. Tombs!... Oh, I say, Bordman!"

But Bordman continued to sag. His body slipped from the chair to the floor, and Armitage ran to his side. He put his arms under the fragile body and carried it over to the lounge. The poor, unhappy wretch! Armitage began to pace the room impatiently, every now and then peering down into the drab face. Ten minutes later there came a rap on the door, and Armitage sprang toward it.

One glance at Bordman was enough for the doctor. He caught up the telephone and called for an ambulance.

"Bad?" asked Armitage.

"He's been bad for a long while. By the look of him, he's been a dead man for a month gone. He must have kept on his feet by sheer will. Who is he?"

"My old real-estate agent. He went away some months ago; but he went away too late. Poor devil!"

Poor devil indeed! thought Armitage. All his beautiful plans had come to naught. A sick man the day he absconded, probably. Not a bit of joy out of the deed, only misery, mental and physical. Why had he done it?

"He is really dying?"

"Yes. I'll give him a few hours. The next fit of coughing will be his last. There, he's coming around. But don't talk to him. We'll get him over to the hospital first."

"I'll go along with you. He hasn't a soul in the world to look after him, so far as I know."

It was half after three when they laid Bordman out on the hospital cot. There was nothing to do but await the end. Any moment the hemorrhage might attack him, and that would be the end.

"I wish to talk," Bordman whispered.

The doctor shook his head. "If you like..."

"Something to deaden the desire to cough for a few minutes!"

"I can do that," said the doctor. "But it will only hasten the end," he added, warningly.

"So much the better. Give it to me!"

A drab little man, with weak eyes, a ragged drab mustache, drab hair; a face that was drab death's sketched on a drumhead. All these years of rectitude, then out of the drab orbit like a comet, only to circle back, beaten, broken! thought Armitage. Why had he done it? What infernal impulse had flung him into the muck of dishonor?

"Tell the doctor to leave us. I feel the drug."

"He wants to talk to me alone," said Armitage.

"All right. I'll go over to that empty cot there. Wave your hand when you want me."

Armitage understood. Bordman wanted to tell him where and how he had hidden the money. He was glad now that he had forgiven. There was nothing now but infinite pity in his heart.

"Lean down," whispered Bordman.

Armitage did so.

"The girl in your house.... You love her?"

"Yes." But Armitage was startled.

"Real love?"

"From the bottom of my soul. But..."

"Beautiful, like a flower! Ah, she is beautiful!... I had tea with her one afternoon, and she was gentle and kind... beautiful... I have committed a crime, a terrible crime... Money has nothing to do with it. But God understands the least of us, and forgives. I know He has forgiven me... because you are here."

Silence. Armitage could hear the ticking of the clock on the wall. A high, thin wail came from the maternity ward.

"I am... Hubert Athelstone... Doris is my daughter!"

CHAPTER IX

STUNNED by this revelation, Armitage fell back in his chair.

"Doris?... Your...?"

"Not so loud! Only you and I and God must know that. She must never know. Promise!"

"I... I promise!"

"Never to see her again.... Never to feel the gentle touch of her hand on my forehead!... Not to see her here beside me!... Ah, they talk of hell; but I know, I know!... And she might have been all mine!... Irony!"

There was a pause; and Armitage waited with unbelieving ears.

"I hated her from the day she was born. Her life cost me her mother's. Few people knew that I was married; scarcely any that I had a child. Many an ugly shell contains a sweet nut. I was like that. I had a soul so big with love that when my wife died my soul left my body and went with hers into the Infinite. You will recall me, a shadow of a man, an insignificant automaton who lived for twenty-odd years in a groove-- from my apartment to the office and back-- and you will try with difficulty to conjure up the possibility of a woman loving me. What first calls love? A pleasure to the eye. A handsome man and a beautiful woman are first drawn by those attractive qualities which are pleasing to the eye. But the woman who loved me did not see me; she saw the soul of me. I was loved, even I, a drab shadow! And I went about my daily affairs, obsequious, hand-washing, a servant for hire, when I should have held my head like a king!"

Armitage bent his head in his hands.

"My cause was vanity. I was not vain, but I wanted to be strong and handsome. I wasn't even ugly, only insignificant. Often I gazed upon you with cold fury because you were endowed with the physical attributes I craved. Every soul has some hidden twist in it. I wasn't satisfied with a soul that had called forth the love of a beautiful woman. I practically kept her in concealment because I lived in terror lest she begin to compare me outwardly with others* I wonder was I insane all those years?"

Never had Armitage known such mental anguish. Only one thought was coherent-- Doris must never know. Those letters! The joy of her when she read them! And now none would ever come again. After a space, Bordman went on.

"I left Doris with a farmer, telling him to give her the name of Athelstone--the first that came into my head. Four years after a merchant friend of mine agreed to take her to Florence, Italy, and put her in a convent school there. He believed her to be a ward of mine. I still hated her. I never wished to see her or hear of her again. I had a little money saved up. She was welcome to that. So with my own hands I calmly dug the pit of this earthly hell I have lived in."

"Why did you do it?" said Armitage, his head still down.

"Every six months I sent a remittance, under the name of Athelstone. I never wished her to find me. It was six years later that God turned His attention to me. One night I was reading in my study. A strange thing happened. I heard a voice calling. It was a child's voice, troubled with tears. I did not understand at first. I took up my book again, but that voice was insistent. Was it mental telegraphy? I don't know. But that child's voice called to me all through the night. It was God warning me that I was a father. Next day, stirred by something, I knew not what, I sat down and wrote Doris my first letter. I have always called her Doris because that was her mother's name. That first letter was a lie; but I was not conscious of that at the time. I wanted to

write to her, but I didn't want her. I told her that I was an explorer, an archeologist, that I was too far away to come to her. In an old book of theatrical celebrities I found the portrait of a man who had been dead many years and many years forgotten. I sent it with the letter. In such a dreadful manner I smothered the first call of conscience. Some months later I was again stirred to write. There was an imperative desire to learn what she was like, what her heart and mind were. I told her she might write to me care of the American consulate at Alexandria, Egypt. I wrote to the consulate to forward her letter, should it come. A month later I received it. It was a child's letter, so full of unspoken yearning that my heart grew troubled; I regretted that I had written at all. Remember, I did not know what was happening to me."

The voice was a low monotone, without emphasis, without inflections. Bordman was husbanding his waning strength.

"My heart grew troubled. But with the old, senseless fury I beat down the feeling. I didn't want her. I didn't want her. I was fighting God and didn't know it! Out of these tentative impulses evolved what I believed to be a great idea. I carried out the imposture at great lengths. I studied the globe in my office, delved into the encyclopedia. Without realizing it, I had found an interest in life, a cruel one, but nevertheless engaging. I fell to explaining the world to her, the pitfalls, the false dawns. I believe I wrote very well. About the time you left home because a rattle-pated woman had jilted you, I awoke. Terror-stricken, I saw in full what I had done. God had been stronger than I. I wanted her now; and I couldn't have her. The man-love for the woman was obliterated by the father-love for the child. I wanted my flesh and blood. "I saw her in the apartment. I heard her songs and laughter. I saw her across the table at breakfast and at dinner. I wanted her and couldn't have her. Why? I had told her a terrible lie. To that lie I had added another and another until I had built a barrier as high as the Alps. Too late I saw that now I could never cross it. I had instilled such faith in truth in her that, did I declare myself, I would have filled her heart with poison, disillusioned her, destroyed her faith in everything. My child, my own, that loves not me, but the shadow I was always dreaming of!--the child, had I not been cursed with blindness, that would have loved me in any condition, in any circumstance, drab as I am, because she was the child of love! No, no, no! I could not go to her and declare myself a liar. But God has forgiven me. He has brought you two together. You love her."

"With all my soul!" Armitage reached out and covered the cold, damp hand with his warm one.

"A madman. And the cap to all this madness was the day you left me with all those powers of attorney. It was a nebulous idea then; but it grew and grew. You remained away so long that I believed you would never return. To protect this child from poverty, from hardship, from menial work! I became obsessed. Legally I knew that you could not disturb her, for she was the daughter of Hubert Athelstone; there were his letters from all over the world, his photograph. It was simple. I would inclose the proper letter, correctly stamped with the stamp of the country I wished it sent from, in a larger envelope, and address it to such and such a consulate, with the superscription directing that if not called for within two weeks, to open and re-mail. She could not remain in that school forever. Soon she would be facing the world alone; and so I helped myself to half your fortune. Early, before you came back, I used to steal into the house and watch her. I had keys. ... And God has brought you back to fall in love with her! She is mine, mine! What she is I made her. She would have grown up like a weed in the field; to-day her mind is as pure as crystal and her heart like a country rose. All this that you might reap. Keep her so, and God guard you both!"

"She shall never know."

"The doctor! Tell him to give me some more of that drug!"

Armitage signaled. But the doctor shook his head. He dared not administer another dose of the drug.

"Listen, Armitage! I can't keep back the cough much longer. I am filling up. I have arranged it at Progreso, Yucatan. When I die, cable the address in my pocket. They will cable Doris that I died there of fever.... I am

tired!"

At five o'clock they laid him back upon his pillow. The little drab man was resting quietly forever.

CHAPTER X

IN the inner pocket of Bordman's coat Armitage found a bundle of papers, consisting of documents, advices regarding mortgages, a confession which ran about the same as the verbal one, and instructions as to the disposition of the body. Among these papers was a lengthy report from the private detective agency. Armitage then realized how well informed Bordman had been regarding his visits with Doris, his rides with her. No doubt one of the servants was in the employ of the agency. It was noon of the following day when Armitage got into the smoker of a commutation train. In the baggage-car was a long pine box. Only half an hour's journey out of New York; but it was the longest half-hour Armitage had ever known. He was going to bury Doris's father.

In the little village cemetery he was made cognizant with another phase of Bordman's character--a well-kept grave, with a simple slab of marble above it :

DORIS BORDMAN

Aged Twenty-four

Beloved

The mother of the woman he loved-- Doris's mother!

Armitage could not get away from the impression that he was walking and moving in a dream. Nothing that he did was real. Doris's father--a drab little man, who wanted to be handsome and strong I A dozen times Armitage, during the solemn moment when the clods fell upon the pine box--Armitage wanted to cry out for some one to wake him. He could not stand this dream any longer! The irony of it all, and the tremendous burden he must carry henceforth! For Doris must never know. She must go through life weaving the most wonderful romances around a personage that had existed only in her real father's imagination. It was all horribly cruel. He would never be able to approach her at the old footing. He knew that from now on he would have to watch his words carefully, guard his thoughts. A casual word, a careless inflection, and the whole veil might be rended. Doris, tender and lovely!

On the way back to New York Armitage proceeded to destroy the papers, one by one. Bit by bit he cast them forth from the car window. He read the confession through again and again, and was about to rip it in two when he noticed for the first time that something had been pinned to the back. It was Doris's last letter to her father.

Darling Daddy,--This is to tell you a great secret. You remember once that you wrote me if I ever loved a man to let you know at once who and what he was. So I am keeping that promise. I love! It seems so wonderful that I can't just believe it. And who do you suppose? The young man whose house you bought I Isn't it just marvelous? He hasn't told me he loves me, but I think he does. It's the way he looks at me sometimes, when he thinks I'm not watching. He is good and kind and handsome. To me he is like some prince out of a fairy tale. Is it wrong to love the way I do, Daddy? I don't feel any shame in confessing it to you. No, no! It is glorious! Only, I think he's a little afraid of me at times. Please, please, come to me. Daddy! I want you. I hunger all the time for you. You mustn't think the way you do. Only remember that your Doris loves you, loves you I

Armitage felt himself torn between the profound tragedy of it and the blinding glory of the revelation. That his eye had seen this letter was plain sacrilege. What to do with it? He could not keep it. He could not tear it up and toss it to the winds-- it would be like tearing his heart out. And yet it was his clear duty to destroy anything and everything that might lead to the truth. But he could not destroy this letter, he just could not.

The train was drawing into the Grand Central when he found a solution, the true one. He would put the letter and the confession in one of his lock-boxes at the bank. Some future day, when he and Doris were going down the golden twilight of middle age, he would tell her. It would be impossible to carry such a secret to the grave. Twenty years hence, if he lived, he would tell her. She would understand then. She would forgive. Youth would have been hers in all its glory. He would tell her then--Doris--when the painful recollections of this hour were no more.

Having determined upon this course, Armitage discovered that he was still young. As he stepped out of the Grand Central, into the crisp air and fading sunshine of a winter day, it seemed to him that he had miraculously dropped the pall behind.

The butler smiled pleasantly as he took Armitage's hat and coat.

"There is a fire in the study, sir. Miss Athelstone will be down in a moment."

Armitage went into the study and approached the fire, spreading out his hands toward the heat, for it was now sharp weather outside. It was odd, but he never entered this room without the feeling that he was in the middle of some fantastic dream. He saw the photograph on the mantel. It fascinated him, and by and by he took it down and turned it over. Bits of an old newspaper adhered to the back. The photographer's name was gone. The adoration in the girl's eyes whenever she gazed at this sublime mockery! The full depression of the day rolled back over his heart. He wanted to lay his head on his arms and weep.

"God help me!" he said, aloud.

"Do you need His help, then?"

He wheeled, thoroughly frightened. He had heard no sound, and here she was, close at his elbow, eying him gravely.

"Don't we always need Him?" he answered. "I was thinking out loud."

He held out his hand rather awkwardly, and as she put hers into it he bent and reverently kissed the hand. Save in lighthearted mockery, he had never kissed a woman's hand before. Perhaps he kissed it because he was in mental terror lest he throw his arms around her and smother her lips. When he raised his head the flurry of passion was gone.

On her part she had taken a deep, quick breath and closed her eyes that she might not see his head so close.

Rather an embarrassing pause followed this demonstration. They were both strangely stirred, not so much by the meeting as by preoccupation.

"And so you have returned?" she said.

"Had to"--with a lame attempt at lightness. How he loved her!

"You went away in a hurry."

"I'm an odd duffer. I do a lot of strange things that nobody else would think of doing. I suppose I haven't got all the way back into my civilization shell."

She took something from the mantel. She held the object out toward him. The expression on her face was puzzling.

"What's this?" he asked.

"It's a glove. Your name is written inside in ink. You left it on the floor of the storeroom."

Thunderstruck, Armitage took the glove and sat down.

"Why?" She covered her eyes for a moment as if to shut out some dread picture. "I... I might have killed you! ... It would have killed me!... Why? Haven't I told you--haven't I tried to impress upon you that anything you wanted was yours for the simple asking?"

He sat there, dumb. The glove hypnotized him.

"Whatever was in that safe was yours. All you had to do was to tell me. Why didn't you?"

He wet his lips, but he could not find the words he needed.

"There is some dreadful mystery here. I have felt it all along. You would not have acted thus otherwise. Won't you please tell me?"

"I'd rather not."

"Then there is a mystery?"--quickly.

He twisted and pulled at the glove. Fool! He saw now that he had blundered hopelessly. Had he come to her frankly about the wall safe she would never have known, and now he must tell her, if only in self-defense.

"Yes, there is a mystery, but it really doesn't concern you. That is why I acted as I did. I said nothing because I did not want you to worry. I was waiting against the time when your father came back."

Her father!

"Does Betty know?"

"Yes."

"Tell me."

"Must I?"

"I shall know no rest until you do. This must be cleared up."

"Well, this is the story. My agent was a dishonest man. When I went away I left him with full powers of attorney. He took all my ready cash, converted the stocks and bonds, and sold this house to you. He took that money also. Legally, before any court in the land, this house and all that's in it are yours."

"But morally?"

"Why bother about that? It was all due to my carelessness. There were mortgages in that wall safe, together with my mother's jewels. You're such a strange, unusual girl, I wasn't sane but you'd run away if I told you. That's all there is to the mystery. He took only half. I am still comfortably situated."

"That wizened little old man who bobbed like a cork on water! And I am really-- morally, if not legally--an

interloper! All along I sensed something out of the way. Was it you behind those curtains that first night?"

"Yes. But I didn't know then what had happened."

"I must call Daddy at once."

"No!" There was sweat on his forehead, but it was cold. "I couldn't come back here to live now. I couldn't."

"Why not?"

"Well, I'd always be seeing you in these rooms. In my mind you have become an integral part of the house. It is morally as well as legally yours now. Your father's purchase was made in good faith. You cannot give it back to me now if you wished."

"Everything is in my name. You are like I am; we lie awkwardly and badly. But if I lied it was because I was terribly proud and unhappy. My father!... Could you love a shadow man?... I have never seen my father. All I have is the photograph and his letters. I have never seen him. Here is the reason." She produced a letter which she held out to him. "All my life I've been living on promises. I have waited and waited... all in vain. He never comes. He never comes. He loves me. Oh, I could never doubt that. He loves me, but he never comes." There was a break in her voice, her eyes brimmed and overflowed. "Read it."

He had gone through so much during the past twenty-four hours that it seemed to Armitage that he had become dehumanized, that he was only a thinking marionette. He took the letter and opened it. For a time there was no sense to the written words under his gaze. He had to summon all his forces to throw off the appalling numbness before the words adjusted themselves into meaning forms.

Progreso, Yucatan, March, 1909.

My Darling,--Your last letter was like a hand squeezing my heart. So you must know the truth! I have always known that this hour must come. A thousand times I have started toward you, only to be dragged back by cowardly--yes, your father, for all his preaching, is a coward!--fear. When I received that photograph of you, I knew that it would be long years before I would have the courage to look upon you. The dread fear that has always been in my heart was realized. You were the reincarnation of your mother. If I looked upon your living face it would kill me. Your mother is ever with me. I am a strange man, a pariah, a wanderer on the face of the earth, homeless and unhappy. It has come to the pass where I dare not look into fires. I am always seeing you and your mother. Your mother died when you were born. But her soul always walks beside me. Am I cruel and selfish? God alone knows. I repeat, a thousand times the father-love has burned furiously in my heart, and I have hastened toward you, only to turn back. I wonder if in all this world there is another man so utterly miserable and accursed? But God always bless you and guard you and make you happy some day as you deserve.

Your Father.

Armitage heard Doris move and looked up. She was standing by the fire, gazing down into it. The photograph on the mantel was missing. From her attitude he judged that she was holding it against her heart.

Men rarely weep, at least rarely from tenderness. The tear-ducts which lead down into the sentimentality in a man's heart seem to dry up after childhood. But as Armitage stared at the letter again the lines with their odd but familiar little curlicues and shaded capitals became grotesquely blurred. He recalled a line in another letter written by this hand. "You were to me a cipher drawn on a blackboard, something visible through the agency of chalk, but representing--nothing." He had almost forgotten one thing--that cable to Progreso. He would send it on the way home. This time to-morrow night Doris would learn that her father was dead. The mockery

of it!

He stood up, resolute and masterfully.

"Doris!"

She turned, still clasping the photograph to her heart. There was a brief tableau. What she saw in his face was only a reflection of what he saw in hers.

"Doris, will you marry me?"

"Is it love?"--in a low, wondering whisper.

"Ay, all am and all I have!"

The photograph slipped to the floor and the letter fluttered down beside it. What followed was one of those indescribably beautiful moments which God permits to fall to the lot of man and woman but once. They were in each other's arms without comprehending how it happened. So they stood for a space, she grasping tensely the sleeve of his coat, he smoothing her hair without consciousness of the act.

"When?" she whispered, presently.

"The first time I saw you, beyond those curtains."

"It is like that. In my heart you were always there, mistily, until I saw you that afternoon at Betty's. I thought you loved the other woman--until I heard you laugh."

He tilted her chin up and looked into her eyes. Then he kissed her--not as he had kissed any woman before. It was less the kiss of a lover than that of a devotee at a shrine. It was something holy, something that breathed of abnegation. And what was that kiss to her? The first in all her recollection that any man had given her.

"I'm so happy, so crazily happy! If you hadn't loved me I'd have died. Always I've hungered for love, and always I've been denied. Your house and mine, forever and forever! God is good. I'm somebody now. I belong!"

Words! thought the man. What a futile thing words were sometimes! So he spoke with his lips and his arms. And all through this lover-hour, great as his love was, he sensed the shadow of the astounding tragedy.

"Oh!" she cried, suddenly breaking away from him.

"What is it?"

"Daddy!" She stooped for the letter and the photograph. Next she seized him by the arm and dragged him over to the lounge, pulling him down beside her. "Don't you see? He'll have to come home now. I'm going to be married!"

Bob Burlingham was right, thought the lover. She was only a fairy, with fairy ideals, condemned to human existence. Ah, and how he loved her!

Once more she caught him by the sleeve, tightly and possessively. He bent his head until it touched hers, and together they watched the bright flames dance in and out the logs.

"Love!" he said, still filled with the warm wonder of it.

"For ever and ever, like in story-books." And she pressed his hand against her cheek and held it there. "I belong!"

THE END

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